THE GOOD LIFE OF THE CITY AND OTHER STORIES

By

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by

Bryan Robert Smith
This document is dedicated to my wife, Gwendolyn Ronay Magee, and my loving parents, Robert and Brenda Smith.
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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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By

Bryan Robert Smith

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Chair: Jill Ciment
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More than anything this work is to provide the reader with a glimpse into the rather strange worlds I’ve created. Through metaphor and character I’ve tried as best I can to represent and recreate for the reader my version of the world we live in, a world haunted by history, both personal and national, where our attentions are constantly divided between the trivial and the profound. Also, this work is a tribute to the imagination, which is more often than not heard but not seen. I’ve attempted, because it means a great deal to me, to blur the distinctions between the real and imaginary life, hoping to find a middle ground where something of worth might be said, and I hope the reader gains some enjoyment from the effort.
THE COCOON

Just when I needed relief from my apartment and its low-grade tribulation, when my entire day was opening the mail that drifted to me confetti-like from the outposts of the world: Norfolk, Bridgeport, Richmond, priming me for water vacuums and cost-discount detergents, I fell in love with my friend and neighbor, Allen, in the lobby of our complex. He’s an office boy up from Little Rock, one of these with a wild story, who wears shoes the size of toy boats and recently witnessed the death of a coworker—apparently some folks at his office killed one of their own right there during the workday. It was in the news.

This is while I was under house arrest, when I found myself unemployed in the middle of life from the Knightsbridge Academy for Precious Children.

A woman claimed I’d run her over in my Volvo. I can’t say it wasn’t true.

When she appeared in court she wore a sling she’d made out of some drapery. She was a thousand years old, and her sling was pale blue and had little gray ducks on it that made everyone want to weep. My lawyer appeared livid but backed down easily, waving in his hand a pristine copy of Lenin and Philosophy, and though well-trained, his argument was academic in nature, and anyone could plainly see the jury was not buying it.

Her lawyer was of the prancing variety and shook and whinnied and objected in a falsetto like a little girl, so terrible the court reporter started out of her chair and never came back. The jurors didn’t like the look of me, my lawyer said. He wanted me sullen,
wearing plain dresses and dabbing at my eyes with paper. I refused and the jury handed down the verdict and there followed a brief but irascible sentence from the judge, who spoke clearly and without participles.

After the sentence was read, a friend said, Oh, Judy, how could you let the world push you aside so easily, at such a significant time?

I told her if she was such a good friend she wouldn’t say such things. But I could see her point. I wasn’t getting any younger.

I had to tell the judge when it was through: I’d run her over again, again, and again. Not on purpose. The truth is I don’t know how my car works. I am not responsible for that. It comes and goes by itself, as far as I know. I say it must not have liked the looks of her in her woolen dress, her eyes bearing down on the youth of this world and their mild effrontery, which is what I hold precious above all else, but no one wants to hear that side of the story. They want to know about her hospital receipts and how it is that she’s got my plates memorized, and what the dirt of the Depression tasted like. She is that old. Surely, they think, age has made her incapable of a lie. She’s one of these that if you graze a pinkie the whole arm falls dead to the ground. And with the good arm she is summoning the law and its participants. Some people cannot get to the grave fast enough.

My point is that when I see Allen it is always with relief. I’ve never visited his apartment, so I stand in the mailroom where I sometimes see him. He appears suddenly—lunging down the stairs, head down, his hand lighting on the banister. He was raised on a catfish farm in Little Rock by an uncle, in a part of the country where solemnity is expected from a man. He mumbles a little, and his coworkers called him girlish. He’s thin
and shivers from the Northern cold, and behind his back, though he heard them, they called him Country Fag and played practical jokes on him.

It’s you, he says.

Yes.

What are you doing here?

Waiting.

I know he’s not happy. His situation is one of great difficulty, and he leaves his apartment now only for food and the mail. Sometimes I press my ear to his door and hear only shuffling, shuffling then silence. Now that his business went under on account of the killing, he has to decide whether to stay in finance, where he is something like a dog among men, or become what he wants, a French teacher, though there’s little work in it here. And the city itself is far different for him—he’s not breathed it his whole life. His explorations, even after five years, are tentative still, and he still calls home now and then to relate some exotic detail, but it’s all for naught. The city means something very different to his uncle, and now the meaning’s changed.

I was thinking—

But he doesn’t finish. He comes up on me fast and like a child tries whispering in my ear. I am too slow moving.

Sometimes he speaks of the nightmare he’s been having. It is always the same. In it his coworkers are deranged. The men instead of working read pornography, and the women hike their skirts up to compete. Always a man stands up in the office and says that he’s going away to a cocoon for a transformation, that when he returns he’s going to
change their lives for the better, but when he finally gets back he’s the same as before.
Nothing changed at all. So they kill him.

What’s so crushing, Allen says, is that we believe him every time. I believe him, and the time when we wait for his return is hopeful. I don’t know that we know what to believe--there’s discussion of him returning with wings, with healing powers, and so on. But, of course…

He spreads his arms open above his knees, as if the conclusion sits between them.

Hearing this I remember a time where in youth I had been filled with something like joy around the clock. It was debilitating. I was so happy I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep. It was like electricity had got loose in me. I had a position through a friend teaching world literature at the Knightsbridge School, and was just out of school myself and my body had yet to start scrambling all over itself. I thought myself proud, well-admired. My students were golden, and I gleamed bright as glass in the sun. One spring I was almost married to a gentleman named Roberts, a small-claims lawyer from Chelsea who was destined for greater things, but we fell out on account of his mother, who was of the philosophy that because such great things were to come, then why not wait for them, why settle? He said himself that she was being nasty, that her history had gotten to her in an unkind way, because his father had died young, though I think his feelings were hurt by her saying he had chosen not so well. After a period of general righteousness, where he paraded me around like I was the messiah newly born, he made his way over to her side of things and left me high and dry. I decided I had loved him and in the sullen aftermath made it incontrovertible. I woke up one morning and felt the full weight of sorrow in me and immediately began the process of dismantling my beauty with food.
Oh, I say. Oh. Don’t look at me. I’m sorry. This face is not for you. It’s not what you said. I’m thinking of someone else.

Tuesday is the same. Again, he comes vaulting down the stairs. Always it is a sad thing, as if he’s on the verge of throwing his body to the ground. I just stand with my hands folded, a sheaf of mail in one and a part of my blouse kneaded in the other. I too have dreams, only they are of the children of Knightsbridge, who I miss dearly. Of everything they have a different use. We had them into biology for a while but they wanted to paint the cultures red and make signals out of them. It is a progressive school, and the children are bright enough so that we act as facilitators, asking about their interests then providing them with the necessary materials. For a while they were into falconry, but all of the birds starved to death. Then it was, predictably, paleontology, but that too was short-lived. Most of them, though only eight or nine years old, are waiting to be in television. With their books, which we so generously give, they build sound stages, soap-opera sets. They gathered them together in heaps, based on thickness and width, hardcover or soft, and arranged them into shapes. *Moby Dick* for instance, was the base of the stage itself, while far thinner *Candide* they used for lighter purposes. With enough glued together they made some trees, a plant or two. In a way they rebelled because we did not encourage them in this. But when we tried taking the books away the parents went haywire. We tried to explain ourselves, but we got only general skepticism in return. What kind of school were we? and so forth. So now some of the children are writing a script for a sitcom that has a talking car.

But it’s been done, I told them. They don’t care.
Not well enough, they say. This time the car is telepathic. We know our demographic. We know what to do.

My point being that without the Knightsbridge children I feel I have very little in the world, though whose fault is that? All I can say is that marriage walked right away from me and I withstood the rejection not too well, that I’m sure there was more for me in life and that I never took advantage. This is why the old lady. I saw her for a moment, tired and small, and saw in her some portent of my future. It was not like a dream. There was no phantom to exorcise. So, I ran her over.

To Allen, all I say is: I miss the children.

Oh?

Of course. You’re like them in some ways, but overall it’s different. You’re a child, but not like them. They’re younger, brighter.

Oh, that’s nice, he says, hurt. He tilts his head, letting a piece of dark hair fall across his forehead.

But it’s true. If you were bright you’d go teach. They do what they want, though they have opportunity enough. It’s something you miss when you can’t do it anymore. You don’t miss your work at the office, do you? There’s no reason to miss it except for the money.

Sure. Allen hasn’t told me yet about what really happened at his office, though I’ve read it in the paper. I don’t ask.

So, we sit on the stairs together, silent.
Wednesday I got fed up and walked straight out of the complex to Harvey’s to get some oranges, and when I returned the police where there waiting for me with Allen at their side, his hands trembling.

What did you do? I said. All I did was get produce and I bet you’re on the phone yelling “fugitive” into the receiver. How’d you even know I was gone?

They were going to break your door down.

Oh.

The policeman, they were nice about it and all. They spoke to me like they were scolding one of their own, but in the end they said they’d have to take me to the station if it happened again.

Sometimes he speaks of going home. It’s a warm, detached speech that figures in it many dogs, and a low hill that rose up toward the trees that he once rode a bicycle across. Mainly he speaks of his uncle, who he envisions is alone and falling into age without the benefit of family. Perhaps, he thinks, he should go home to take care of him.

But the next Tuesday he says he’s applied to teach at an American school in Calais. He’s almost weeping. The effort must have been great for him. He’s stopped leaving his apartment altogether but to get the mail. Though I’m proud of him I show immediate concern.

Are you changed? You think you’re ready now to move on?

I don’t know, he says. I just did it. I saw the ad on the computer and knew it was something I had to do. He puts his head in his hands, then raises up, exhibiting in his face some resolve, his lips tight together. That was when I fell in love with my neighbor. I
regarded him narrowly and saw in him some nobleness. He was standing there by the apartment doors with his head up and his hands in his pockets, his chin thrust out like he was readying himself for a gale that might knock him down. It was simple and brief. I didn’t say anything about it.

I said, Then we’ll make the arrangements together. I’ll help you. I can get you ready for France. I started calling friends. I’d never traveled abroad and so had to get the information from others. I took packets of information to him about places to see, about getting his visa properly. Most of it, I think, he had already researched himself though he was of a good enough nature to let me give him whatever I found anyway. I helped with plane tickets, weather reports, train schedules. On the computer, with some of his savings he orders luggage from a place in Midland. In the picture he shows me how the leather gleams, and he points to each suitcase and describes the number of clothes that fit in each.

Thursday, from beneath my door, I receive a note requesting a meeting. I put on my good blouse, the purple one, and walk up the one flight to get to his apartment. Before knocking I press my ear to the door and there is nothing. I knock and the sound echoes in the hall, where one of the lights has burned out and not been replaced. When no one answers I go home.

Two weeks later I get a letter in the mail and the return address is Little Rock. There is little in there that interests me now. It says only that his uncle needed some help, that he went home. I feel resigned in my thoughts, I think one day I’ll save some money and get myself to San Diego where it’s warm and buy a little ice-skating rink and invite
Olympian hopefuls to train there for free. I'll meet a good-natured fool and settle down and buy a ranch house. I read in a magazine once that there’s a train they’ve got over there that rides right over water. Before I die I’d like to see that.

In my thoughts about the past though sometimes I see him following me up the stairs and through my door and onto my sofa, and I sit down next to him, playing my hands upon my lap, craning my horse’s neck and forgetting the tea I’ve offered.

He opens his mouth to speak and almost nothing comes out. It is a whisper and barely that. An eddy of air laying low over the tongue, wandering through moving lips. I would slide down the couch, just away from him, slightly away and then, because I have so few illusions of this life, I would just sit and move not at all and admire the red of his face and the pale blue veins of his wrists and say nothing.
THE BLUE ANGLES

Anytime I ask Mr. Barry Johns for a favor his head starts waving around like his neck is a hinge. It’s a nervous habit of his. I’ve been asking him for a raise for two years so I can buy a car, so I’m kind of used to it. Now that I’m asking him if I can leave work early today for some minor surgery it’s started again. He blinks his eyes slowly, keeping the lids closed for a beat too long as his head dances back and forth. He’s hard of hearing and I keep having to repeat myself to get him to understand.

I’ve been setting type at this paper for five years, Mr. Barry Johns has been the print master for ten.

“It’s just that I’m having some moles removed today,” I say, “I need to be at the doctor’s at ten-thirty.” I point to my watch to emphasize the time.

“Yes, yes, I see,” he says, “some minor surgery.” His wide palms are resting on the desk. All around him are enormous stacks of our newspaper, some of them dangerously close to tumbling over. It looks, in some way, as if he’s conducting an experiment that’s taking years to develop.

“Moles,” he says absentmindedly. “That one,” he says, pointing a long finger at this beauty mark I have on my cheek, “they aren’t taking that one are they?”

“No, sir. Just some on my chest and back.”

“What?”
“It’s just that I need an extra half hour to walk down to Dr. Kingsley’s. And the nurse says there’s no way to know how I’ll react to the anesthetic, so I need to know if it’s okay if I don’t come back today? I might not be back until tomorrow.”

“What is it? Ah, a half hour. Sure. It’s no problem, Mike,” he says. “Take the day.”

“Thank you. That’s really great.”

Before I go I ask him if this can be our secret, that, if possible, could he keep this to himself? “It’s a private matter,” I say. “It’s medical, and I just don’t want it to get around.”

“No problem. No problem,” he says, and before I leave he draws an imaginary zipper shut across his open mouth and waves a big white palm at me, his lips curling into a smile on his face.

Less than an hour later it becomes obvious that Mr. Barry Johns has told everyone about my surgery. Everywhere I go in the printing plant people are calling me moleman. In the lunch room. In the computer room. They’re jovial about it and all, but still. When I walk to the front desk to pick up today’s mail, Andy, the receptionist, after sorting through the bin, hands me the small pile of leaflets and press releases that come in daily and starts giggling a little. For a moment I have an urge to ask him what’s so funny about my dermatology, but the urge passes. Even the editor of the paper, Chuck, who I’m older than by like ten years, greets me in the hall with a smirk and asks will I burrow into the den that is the camera room and bring him back his shots of yesterday’s Bristol High field hockey victory over Burlington.
“Yes,” I say. “I’ll get right on it.”

I walk back into the dark of the photo room and sink down in the wooden chair that is my only piece of furniture, and try to focus on the fact that this evening I’m set to see the fighter pilots of the Blue Angels, whose arrival I have been counting down on my pocket calendar, who have come all the way from Norfolk to give a talk about teamwork before this weekend’s air show at the shipyard downtown. All of sudden, since I heard that they were coming, I’ve been really interested in piloting. It’s one of those things about me I guess. I close my eyes, lean my head back and stretch, imagining their clear voices carrying throughout the library, hoping that I get a seat close to the front. When I finally open my eyes, Linda Tecce, our single ad-rep, is standing over me, dressed in her usual sweat-suit and tennis shoes. Her hands are above her head nervously tussling the great rise of red hair she’s taken pains to arrange just so. She’s always trying to drum up money for the Elks Easter Drive or the Bristol High Pom-pom girls’ trip to Ann Arbor. Her desk is a mountain of booster candy that she’s constantly trying to sell, and almost every day she’s coming to me with a fistful of chocolate because she’s learned I don’t have the heart to say no.

Before I can tell her I don’t have any money today, she says, out of nowhere, that her son Cody is free this afternoon, that he could take me to the doctor for my surgery if I like, because she’s asked around and no one else seems too interested. Her son Cody is a dwarf, not even tall enough to ride the Pirate Ship ride for teenagers at Great Adventure. She says she knows I can use the help because I don’t have a car. I don’t want to go with Cody, so I don’t say anything. Her jaw is working up and down vigorously. Every word is a syllable too long. She says that if Cody takes me to the doctor maybe he can go with
me to see the pilots of the Blue Angels, that he’s been looking forward to it and that she
knows I’m going, because I’ve been talking about it all week. She bats her eyes and says
that I’d be doing her a favor, that most of Cody’s friends have moved away to college. I
grip the sides of my chair with both hands and try to make myself invisible, sinking down
into the surrounding darkness. I want more than anything to be able to say no. For a
moment I think that if I sit silent for long enough she’ll go away, but she doesn’t move.
Her hands are rooting around in her hair, almost like it’s beyond her abilities to pull them
out, as if her hands are stuck there and she’s too ashamed too ask for help. Then it
happens. From far away I hear my wavering voice saying that her plan sounds great, and
by the immediate look of joy on her face I see that what I have said has immediately
moved into a realm where it is beyond retraction. So, I say it again—that her idea sounds
great, that I’d go with him to the fighter pilot talk if he takes me to the doctor.

The few times Cody had come to the plant to see his mom, he seemed alright. He
takes photo classes at the art school downtown and shows me his work now and then. I
like it. They’re pictures mostly of local bridges and buildings, dark water, old people
dancing. He’s not bad. He has a truck that he’s worked on since before he graduated from
high school that’s lifted so far off the ground he’s put a retractable ladder on the runner to
get in and out of it.

I’m standing out in front of the plant trying not to glance at my watch again—
because last time I looked it was half past ten—when Cody comes tearing into the
parking lot, looping tightly around the corner of the plant entrance, revving up to meet
me. I have to reach up about shoulder height to open the door. I have to grab the side of
the door by the interior handle and hoist myself up into the truck’s cabin. Cody’s just sitting there, staring straight ahead, one arm out of the window, the other resting lightly on the wheel. He’s got a muscle tee on and an enormous silver cross dangles from a gold chain around his neck. When I shut the door he accelerates immediately, pushing me back into my seat before I can even get my belt on.

The ride is pretty much silent. When we get to Dr. Kingsley’s Cody says that he needs to park around the corner because his truck won’t fit into the regular spaces on the street facing the office, so I jump out and run inside, hoping I’m not going to have to wait forever. As soon as I get up to the receptionist’s window, Agnes, the receptionist, is opening the door that leads back to the rooms like they’ve been waiting all day for only me, and says that Dr. Kingsley will be happy to see me right away.

Right away the doctor is there to see me. He comes marching in, holding my bulky file in both hands like a schoolboy holding his books. He thwacks the file down on a small table and claps his hands together and says, “Let’s get to work then,” and turns toward me. He’s to remove seven moles today, the seven that he said looked iffy during my last visit three weeks ago. Two on my chest by my collar bone. One on my lower back above my waistline. One on the nape of my neck, just below the hairline. One beneath my left arm, another to the left of my belly button, and the last settled on my right arm just below the small of my shoulder. He starts with the one on my belly by putting a needle in me right next to the mole. It’s the local, he says. It should wear off in an hour or so. He waits a few seconds, his body close enough so that I can feel his breath on my face. He sighs deeply then begins to cut, saying just before that I might feel a bit of a pinch. I turn my head away and feel only a slight pressure, and by the time I’ve
turned back he’s finished stitching up the pale pink wound and is applying a bit of gauze and white tape over the area. Each time it’s the same, only his breath is hitting me in different places as he slowly orbits my body, working from the front counterclockwise to the back until he’s finished and facing me. On the small table next to my file are seven little vials, each one with a mole inside, each settling in its own clear liquid. Dr. Kingsley says that we’re all through, that I’ve been a real trooper. He smiles. He says not to worry, and I say that I am worried. That I haven’t thought of much else since he last told me I needed to get the moles removed three weeks ago, that I’ve been worried since he said he would need to biopsy each to be certain I hadn’t developed anything peculiar. But he only nods and promises to let me know if things don’t come from back the lab correct.

“We’ll give you a ring,” he says.

When I get back out to the waiting room, Cody is there ripping pages out of a Cosmo magazine, saying that his mother told him he’d be able to watch the doctor slice off a mole or two, that now he’s pissed because the effing nurse wouldn’t let him come back to the room with me to watch, so he had to wait in the effing lobby the whole time. One of the nurses comes out of the back to see me out and sees the mess Cody has made and starts turning red all over. Without a word she turns around and marches back through the door, and I try to gather up all the pages at once, but I can’t get them all together because they keep falling out of my hands, and every time I bend down to get another up off of the floor I can feel the stitches in my back stretch a little. When it becomes clear that she’s not coming back, Cody and I walk out of the door on to the pavement a few feet when Cody stops. He looks up into the low gray that is today’s sky and says it’s time to drink.
So, I’m sitting next to him, half watching him drive with the mechanism he has to use because his feet don’t reach the pedals. It’s basically two long poles that reach from the floor from both the accelerator and the brake, plus this ring that sits in front him to help him reach the wheel. It makes me nervous riding with him, watching him fumble with the levers and the wheel, though he manages all right. Even so I feel like I need to be on my guard. I keep poking myself in the belly, where one of the moles used to be, to see how long the local will last—it’s like me to do that, just to see if it’s going to hurt, if it still hurts, if it still hurts now, etc.

All last night I kept trying to think of interesting questions I could ask the pilots in order to get myself in with them. The first time I saw the Blue Angels they were relatively unremarkable. My Dad took me to an air show at the Millington base in Memphis, near where he lived at the time, and even through the noise of the jets and the spectacle of it I wasn’t that impressed. Now, I don’t know. Something’s different. There’s something extraordinary about men who look like they could be your next-door neighbor flying four hundred miles an hour in a fighter jet. Looking at their photos on the flyer, at the grins on their faces, I get the sense that they know something that other people don’t, that they’ve narrowly escaped the ordinariness of life, and that they want to tell us how—they look like they want to help.

When we get to the bar, Cody refuses to let me out of the truck until I’ve shown him every place the doctor has cut. When I start to show him the white bandages covering each, there are seven in all, his eyes widen, and he starts saying that they look
like gunshot wounds. He asks if I have cancer or anything, and I shake my head, though, truthfully, I don’t know.

“I don’t think so,” I say. “I don’t really know.”

Immediately I imagine a number of gray, pea-shaped tumors inside of my body. For some reason I can’t attribute a color to them. They’re just black and white. I imagine I can hear Doctor Kingsley’s voice on the telephone saying that, according to the test results, what I have inside of me constitutes a grave emergency, that I should come in right away if I desire to live. I start to imagine that once the results are back in there’s going to be nothing left for me, no more time. Cody, through all of this, is saying that he knows a lot about doctors, which I kind of know about already because his mom talks all the time about how hard it was for him when he was little because of all the surgery he’d had to go through so he could walk. Both Cody and I were born here, grew up here. Only I’m a few years older.

The bar isn’t bad. It’s a big rectangular bar just like every other bar only it’s made of really fine wood, and in the back there’s a little window where, if you get right up to it, you can see the river. Cody climbs up on a barstool and starts ordering whiskey sours. The bartender pours them then walks through this door behind the bar and into an adjoining room that I can’t see, leaving us alone. I walk over near the door we came in and make a telephone call.

“Dr. Kingsley’s office.”

“Agnes? Is this the receptionist, Agnes?”

“Hello, yes?”
“I was just in, Mike. I had the moles taken off.”

“Sure.”

“I just wanted to know if I could speak to Dr. Kingsley.”

“Do you need something in particular?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Well, let me see. I think he’s busy, Mike. Maybe I can help? Do you want to leave a message?”

“I really think I should speak to him.”

“Well, I suggest you call back later then. Okay?”

“Okay, Agnes.”

“Goodbye, Michael.”

“Goodbye.”

When I get back to the bar Cody has finished his first whiskey and is working on mine. He’s trying to rub out an obscene picture he’s drawn on the bar with a felt pen, but it looks like it’s not coming off.

“Calling home?” he says.

“No. I live alone.”

“You don’t have a roommate or anything?”

“No.”

“Listen, there’s some girls coming to meet us. We’ve got time to kill before the pilots get here, right?”

“Of course. Okay.”
It turns out that it’s this girl from copyediting who is insanely thin, Lauren, and her friend, Liz, who’ve I’ve never met. Both of them know Cody. They say they’re both quitting their jobs today, that they’re not going back. That going to lunch and never returning is their plan. Liz, who looks pretty smart, says she designs dresses at Jones Co.

“When I first started I designed this dress that Mira Sorvino was supposed to wear to some fund-raiser or something. At home I have a picture of her wearing it.”

“You must be good,” I say.

“No, really. It was horrible. I couldn’t believe it.”

“Fashion,” says Lauren, “means a lot to Liz. She’s got a knack for it.”

“Liz’s crazy,” says Cody.

“Cody, really,” says Lauren.

Cody and Liz pair off together, so that their backs are facing me and Lauren, and Cody is telling Liz the story of my doctor’s visit in a way that’s making Liz laugh. Lauren says to me: “Liz is the smartest person I’ve ever met.” I nod, not really caring. The bar is practically empty, a couple in business dress sit in the far corner beneath the window where the river sits.

“Do you want a drink, Lauren?”

Lauren says, “of course,” and I ring the little bell on the bar that makes it sound like I’m summoning someone to check out books then put what little cash I have on the bar when the bartender makes his way through the door.

“You weren’t at work this morning,” says Lauren.

“Yeah, I was there for little bit. I had to go to the doctor’s.”
“You aren’t sick are you? My aunt was just sick. Her dog was sick too. They had the same thing. A cold or the flu or something. Is that weird?”

“I don’t think I’m sick. I don’t know, actually. They had to send some stuff to a lab and check it out.”

She blinks very slowly while staring right at me, as if something I’ve said has suddenly made her brain reset, and she’s waiting for the rest of her functions to come back online.

“Say, what do think of Andy?” says Lauren.

Andy is the head printer at the paper. He’s tall and bit overweight, and he barely says anything ever, even when it’s apparent that he should be speaking. You have to ask him something a million times to get him to respond to a question or anything.

“He’s fine. I like him I guess.”

“We’re getting married, did you know? Sometimes, Mike, I think he’s so dull. He’s very plain sometimes.”

She flashes what is supposed to be her engagement ring across my face, and I manage to look impressed as she scrutinizes my reaction.

I drink more whiskey. It is warm and sweet at first then begins to burn halfway down, warming my chest. I don’t say much.

“We’re going to marry at St. Andrews.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Andy wants a Catholic wedding, but I don’t at all. We fight about it constantly. He’s Catholic. His whole family is Catholic.”
She tells me all about the arrangements, the planning she’s been doing in her mind since she was a little girl, the kind of wedding she’s always wanted and that Andy isn’t going to let her have. I buy some more to drink.

“We’re both marrying men next October,” she says, “Liz and me.”

After the bar we all walk out into the dazzling light and make our way to Stock’s, where the food is expensive and not so great, where it says on the wall that the Bristol Chamber of Commerce has their meetings here. The whole way there I keep thinking that my skin is itching, and then I can’t stop thinking about Dr. Kingsley.

At the dinner table Cody is telling us a story about how he lost his virginity while he eats a plate full of fried shrimp and spaghetti noodles.

I find a telephone just outside and call the doctor’s office.

“Hello, Agnes.”

“Hello.”

“It’s Mike again. I was wondering if Dr. Kingsley is free to talk yet?”

“And what is this in regard to?”

“It’s the moles. I had some moles removed earlier today. Mike Grantzy.”

“Oh, sure. Sure. I remember. Hold on, he’s right here.”

A man’s voice says: “Hello.”

“Dr. Kingsley?”

“Yes, this is Dr. Kingsley. Can I help you?”

“I hope so. I was in earlier. You took some moles off of me, my name is Mike, and you said that you would give me a ring later to tell me how things were.”
“Sure. Sure. What do you need, Mike?”

“I just…Well, I just needed to know when you were going to call. You said you were going to call and after I’d left I remembered that you hadn’t said when exactly.”

“Well, we’ll call when the results are back in, Mike.”

“Yes, but when?”

“I don’t think it should be more than a few weeks. It’s never taken longer than that before. Really, you have nothing to worry about…Is that all?”

“Yes. Okay. Thank you, Dr. Kingsley.”

“No problem. Goodbye, Mike.”

“Goodbye.”

Cody is sitting alone at our table. The girls are huddled together at the end, talking in whispers and turning now and then to look at us.

“Where’d you go?” Cody says.

“The telephone.”

“Oh.”

“I think I might be sick.”

“Liz says that she thinks Lauren likes you. Do you like her?”

“Did Liz really say that? Lauren’s engaged. She just told me she’s engaged. I work with her.”

“I dunno.”
The girls break their huddle. Liz starts to speak then bursts into laughter, and Lauren starts laughing too. They’re looking at one another and laughing. Cody picks up his drink and finishes it in one big swallow then orders another. I order a whiskey.

“We should all go somewhere later,” says Lauren finally.

Liz laughs and looks at the floor.

“We’ve somewhere right now,” Cody says. “Besides, we’re going to hear the pilots before we go anywhere else.”

“What pilots?” Lauren says.

“The fighter pilots. Mike and me are going to hear the fighter pilots.”

“Oh,” says Lauren.

She looks at Liz and shrugs, and Liz’s eyes get wide.

“Who,” specifically to me, Liz says, “are the fighter pilots?”

“They’re just ordinary people, I guess. Just Navy guys. Armed forces. They fly fighter jets all over the US doing shows. Maneuvers, they do maneuvers. They do extraordinary things. It starts in about an hour.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Training.”

“Sounds boring.”

“No. It’s really interesting is what it is. It’s exceptional. They train really hard. You have to be really good to do what they do. It’s like being an astronaut.”

“I’d rather go dancing,” Lauren says. “Let’s all go dancing. We can go to Katmandu and dance.”
Lauren grabs Cody by the hand, so that she’s bending down ever so slightly, like you would with a child, and they begin to dance. Cody is swaying right and left, like he’s being hit by waves, and Lauren is just wagging her hips around, not really moving much else but her free arm.

We don’t make it to the library on time. It takes Lauren and Cody almost twenty minutes to convince Liz that the truck isn’t going to flip over. Liz is scared and saying that she’s seen a Bronco roll over on the highway once, and that she won’t ride in anything larger, and by the time we get her in and calm her down, it’s already ten past. When we get there, up the library steps, there’s a handwritten sign tacked to the door, written in big pink letters, that says:

We’re so sorry but seating capacity is full!

Please be courteous to those who’ve already arrived and

Do not knock.

Hope to see you at the show tomorrow bright and early!

We all wait outside the library, leaning on the truck, sobering up. The girls are bored and tired but neither of them wants to go home. Cody has opened all the doors to his truck and is blasting some rock radio station. He’s sitting on the ground leaning against the right front tire telling Liz about this time he was kicked out of school for cursing at the principal.

Finally, the doors of the library open, low light spilling out. Some old ladies are making their way down the concrete stairs cautiously, as if inside their enormous bags
they’re carrying nitro, something volatile. Then come a lot of fathers and sons, who scurry around the bottom of the steps, talking loud to one another about the presentation, how glad they are they were there to hear what the pilots of the blue angels had to say.

I’m walking toward them slowly, wanting to ask so many questions. What did they say? What do they look like? I want to know everything. Then, out the pilots come, in an obvious hurry. They are very busy getting out of here, holding identical duffel bags, these enormous blue bags with bright yellow lettering, made to resemble lightening, that says: I’m a Pilot of a Blue Angel. One of them is almost running right by me, and I think, this is what someone important looks like up close. This is it, a person with purpose, rushing out into the world. I try to get in front of one of them, a plain looking guy about six feet tall, brown hair; he looks like our floor boss, Jerry Arndt, and I ask him if he has any advice for me, and he stops and looks at me strangely. He’s dressed from head to toe in a bright blue jumpsuit that’s ruffling slightly in the wind.

“I was late. They wouldn’t let us in,” I say, half-motioning to Cody and the girls.

“Oh,” he says. “Sure, it’s wonderful to meet you all.”

I want to ask him where he grew up. If he’d ever had to take a job he didn’t like. If he’d ever had to wait for things to turn his way. If it had come easy.

He doesn’t even bother looking at Cody and the girls. He’s in a hurry. He starts walking away. “I’m sorry you missed the talk. Hope you’re coming to the show tomorrow!”

He checks his watch and begins to move faster down the street, the duffel bag swinging hard at his side. “I’m sorry I can’t stay and talk more about it,” he says, still
going, “We don’t have time. We’re due at the Regency downtown for dinner with the mayor. Wait. Here,” he says, “take this.”

He stops for a moment then magically has his duffel unzipped in one smooth motion and dips his hand deep into it until he pulls something dark out and waves it at me. I kinda jog toward him, surprised, excited about what this might be. Then it’s in my hand already, and he’s gone, halfway down the street boarding a large luxury van where the other pilots are waiting inside.

“What is that?” says Cody.

I look down and open my hand and see that I’m holding a hat that’s all bunched up. In the dark I can barely see it but there’s yellow writing on the brim. I can feel the mesh and the plastic against my hand. Then, their van is driving quickly by in front of us, one of the pilots is smiling and waving out of the window, easily leaving this town behind, and out of frustration, maybe because it’s so cheap, I throw the hat at him, but it barely gets two feet then flutters to the ground and lands, making this plastic click sound, and I’m searching the ground for something hard to throw, something real, and I can’t find anything. There’s no gravel, no sticks. All around me in a circle, I can’t find a thing. It’s incredible. Cody’s telling me it’s time to go, that the van is long gone, probably rolling down I-95 already. But I can’t help myself. I’ve passed the point of incredulity. I’m reaching all around, and there’s just nothing.
THE GOOD LIFE OF THE CITY

On the train to the City my wife and I become luxurious in our delight. I press my face to our car’s window and watch the lights of the stations pass by, and in the dark imagine the mural I’ve been commissioned to paint about the City’s history unwinding itself over the hills, like a great stretch of velvet rolling over the countryside, the scenes of the City’s many wars tumbling over rock and grass. My wife sits opposite me, leafing through fashion magazines, talking about what we might do with the money they’re giving me (the fee is generous). She carries with her a large portable telephone, almost the size of a baby’s arm, she pulls it close to her oval face and talks loudly to our friends, saying that we are on the train right now. “Pick up,” she says, “I’m right in the car. Well, wake up; I want to tell you we’ve bought a telephone you can take with you anywhere.” Already she looks bored. No one is answering her calls. The few that do hang up quickly. All our friends are asleep, she says.

When she brings the phone away from her face and places it on the seat I can see the numbers are lightly colored with make-up, how a part of her stays with everything. She comes over to my side of the car and rests her head on my shoulder and brings her legs up under her, onto the seat. I stroke her chestnut hair and tell her I love her and begin to fall asleep with her under my arm until she stiffens and stretches and retreats dumbly back across the car where her phone sits. We don’t discuss the reason for her being here. She asked to come and that was enough. She says she doesn’t have any friends at home, it is true. Last time, before I left home for a commission in Grenoble, I urged her to go
out, even suggested that she might find work, but when I returned a week later I found her bored again and staring at the walls.

Because the City has agreed to pay our way first-class, an endless stream of porters attends to us, dressed in felt suits, the cheap buttons of which sparkle in the overhead light of our car. They come with gifts for her: desserts she orders, tea and biscuits, a silver tray so that she can have her eyeglasses handy without having to dig for them in her purse. The sound of the train hums beneath us. We shake as the air-conditioner blasts upon our skin, and every so often the horn of the engine sounds into the countryside like a bellowing animal, startling us.

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When the stopping of the train jars us awake from light sleep, we slowly rouse and stretch and gather up our things. After placing her glasses back in her purse and rolling up her magazine to fit beneath her arm, my wife grabs hold of her telephone and steps out into the car’s hallway, telling me to get a move on. She’s excited. For a moment I’m happy she’s come, and I begin to have some hope of her enjoying herself. I walk over to the window of our car and pull the shade up, and a wedge of light appears through the window. Already she’s standing just outside the train with a porter next to her on a small wooden platform, just some yards from the train, and I can see that the track has been laid down in the middle of a ditch of some kind, with heaps of gravel forming a small canyon that we will surely have to climb out of. Then there are the concrete stairs just beyond the platform, leading up and over the rock and, I imagine, continuing on right into the heart of the City. By the time I make my way out on to the platform my wife is already standing next to our luggage, trying to pull a bill from her purse to tip a porter who stands
out of breath and panting at her side. The air is cool, despite it being summer, and the quiet surrounds us, seeping into everything and broken only by the roar of the ocean against the coast

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Ambling along together we make our way to the hotel in the center of City, assured that our luggage will arrive safely. The manager of the hotel is to thank for this. He arrived at the station with a car to speed us to the hotel but I declined his help, saying we’d rather walk if it wasn’t too far. We make light conversation and point at the larger shapes of buildings in the distance, at the castle’s bulky profile, the Maison Dieu’s broad face, where, tomorrow, I’ll begin my work. It is a welcome peace, walking this stretch of road with her. The morning sun throws shadows down from the ash that flank the road. The light plays on my wife’s face, making her look happier, healthier. Scenes like this make me want for a child, a dog, something we can call our own that will walk in front of us or cling to our legs happily, pulling us along the road with its insistence. In all my life I’ve never been to this place. She says she came once with her family when she was a teenager but doesn’t remember much. As we pass through the City gates, my wife at my side humming coolly, an older, fair-skinned man hails us from down the street. We stop short, startled at the intrusion. Only when he is in front of us, smiling widely and extending a hand to my wife, can I see that he’s covered in photographs. To my wife he introduces himself as Michael Kellerin, and she laughs at the sight of him and looks at me questioningly, as if I might know what to do. He bows to us and smoothes his thinning hair back with both hands and says, “Yes, yes. I am strange. I am full of ideas. Do you like them?” He turns fully around and a blur of images forms in our sight until
he’s still again, smiling wide at my wife and trying to apologize for being late to the
station, saying that he was supposed to meet us there. He says he’s heard of my arrival,
and knows that I’m the mural painter. I nod, and my wife smiles at me, as if we share a
private joke, and for an instant I’m thankful for the intrusion. He tells us he lives at the
hotel where we’ll stay and asks if he might walk with us and show what there is to see,
and, not knowing what to do, we resume our walk with him leading the way. We stay
close behind because it is so much easier to see—on top of each of his photographs is
another photograph, attached in each case by a single safety pin fastened to his suit. The
picture on top depicts almost the thing that the one beneath it shows, so that they sit upon
him in pairs, almost identical, and flutter in the wind and flap when he walks. The safety
pins shine, and when he turns to speak to us, which is often, or waves his arms in the air,
a thousand faces and buildings shake in our eyes, and frankly, the effect is quite
unsettling, but my wife seems awestruck and points when his back is turned at this or that
photograph to show me the ones she finds more interesting, and twice when we stop for a
moment so that he can point out some architectural detail he feels is worthwhile, I have to
touch her back to keep her from staring. When we pass the great castle and its outlying
ruins, he becomes more animated, gesturing at its stone walls and leaping here and there
to emphasize a point concerning the width of the moat.

He’s older, though his skin looks like that of a young man, and he tells us about
his travels, saying he’s a veteran of WWII and that he once served here in the Royal
Navy. “I’ve come back to try to do some writing,” he says. He says he wants to evoke the
beauty of the war in his youth. I can’t pretend to imagine there could have been much
beauty in it, but my wife tells him that it sounds like an excellent idea, she says it will
make a wonderful little novel. At the factory near the downs, which I am certain is out of our way, he gives us a view of the ocean, where, atop the cliffs, we can see out into its murky grayness and watch as it reaches out toward the horizon, where a few clouds stand alone, dissipating in the morning sun.

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Michael Kellerin walks us to a spot away from the small factory’s entrance where a number of holes mark the ground, all of them bunched together in a mass, casting wide shadows over the whitened cliff grass. My wife walks over to one and calls me close, telling me to look at how large it is, and I look at it and nod, as if to say that she is right, it is large. There are a number around it, excess dirt stands swollen around the edges of each hole, and I suddenly have an impulse to jump inside, perhaps have my wife take a picture of me inside of it or hand me her telephone so I might call a friend and say, “Look here, you can’t guess where I’m calling from. I’m standing right now in a hole as deep and as large as a standing, full-grown horse on the coast of the City just by the ocean. How do you like that?”

I crawl down inside of one and pace back and forth with small strides, trying to get a sense of how the vantage changes from within it as my wife turns and stares back at the coast. A group of children are playing off to the side of where we stand, some hundred yards away, and my wife stares at them, her hand shielding her eyes from the morning haze. Children have always made her nervous; when we talk about having them she tenses, as if one might come running up out of nowhere and chain itself to her at any moment. And while she talks of them being beautiful at times (this or that child is beautiful) I know that she is afraid of them and I do not know why. Surely we will have a
family some day and the fear will subside. Michael Kellerin walks toward me until he’s standing nearby. In the wind his form seems to change continually on account of the movement from the photos attached to him, like a picture moving in and out of focus, the edges blurring. He stands over me and is silent and when I extend my hand he grabs it and begins to pull me out, I dirty my pants on the whitish dirt of its walls as I try to get a foothold, and then I’m out dusting myself off when Michael starts to walk away beckoning us to the doors of the factory, saying that there is something strange he’d like to show us.

“Go on, look,” he says. The doors of the factory are open, and what he has told us moments ago seems at once to be true. “Down the steps of the factory office, right on the main floor, the workers regularly fight one another bare-fisted and break into tears according to a sequence which no one seems to understand. I’ll show you.” It’s true. From the door of the factory my wife and I see them. At first the violence of it is overwhelming. A man stands against a broken station belt with his nose bloodied, another with his eyes blackened, and here and there a moan makes its way through the noise of the machinery. It is not possible to tell what the factory produces, only that what happens within its walls happens with mechanical regularity. It is like nothing I have seen. First one pair fights, then another, and so on. In the doorway of the factory my wife pushes her hair from out of her eyes; her dress billows around her small body, and she stares in silence. Seeing the men for the first time, we realize only that the gears of the factory are mashing against one another, unwatched, and that, outside, the sea pounds irregularly on the rocks. We turn to Michael for an explanation and I see, as I’ve been seeing, that he’s looking at my wife, staring at her. Without knowing whether it’s because of the scene
we’ve witnessed or my anger at him for bringing us here, I grab her by the arm and push past Michael. He trails behind calling us to wait until I hear his steps quicken then feel his hand as he puts it upon my shoulder, and though I start at his touch, he begins to march us both down Marine Parade into the heart of the borough to our hotel, all the while apologizing for the scene. And while we check in he is there behind us, telling the concierge, who is taking his time, to double his efforts and get us our key, and the man clucks his tongue at Kellerin but does not hasten his search. The key is finally found and we turn to mount the stairs, and still Kellerin follows us. For a moment I think that I will turn back and demand that the little concierge give us another room, I’ll tell him we don’t want a room on Kellerin’s floor, but I keep on. At the third floor we turn from the stairs and make our way down the hall, and Kellerin stays behind, lingering at the end of the hall, shifting his weight from foot to foot like a child trying keep itself still. But when we’re inside the room alone, finally, and my wife tries to comfort me, trying, I think, to get both of our minds off of the men, I hear him outside our door, rustling in the hallway as she kisses my neck and brushes at the dust that has settled there. When I look through the peephole all I can see is the back of his gray head blown up and stretched like a balloon.

“Is he still there?” says my wife. She seems not the least bit worried. I call the desk and complain but they do nothing. My wife presses her ear against the door and nods when I ask if she can hear him still. “I can hear him breathing,” she says. “He’s not doing us any harm. Not really.”

Still weary from the train ride and all that we’ve seen so far, we sleep, until Kellerin wakes us from our slumber by singing to himself just outside our room, the noise
seeping beneath the door like water, so into the hall I go to send him away, but before I speak he smiles and apologizes without giving reason for his disturbance. I stare at him, and suddenly he turns and flees in a haze of black and white, a thousand hands waving to me in their stillness, goodbye.

***

“Are you thinking about them still?” She’s propped her elbows on my chest while I sleep. It’s not yet dawn.

“Thinking about who?” I stretch my arms up against the headboard and grab it as best I can.

“The men at the factory. I can’t stop. Michael said the holes are graves that the women dig for the workers at the factory. Do you think that’s true?”

“I don’t know. He really said that?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know.”

“I was just thinking about it and I wanted to know if you were thinking about them too.”

For a moment I picture the scene at the factory again, only the faces are featureless, like dolls.

“I don’t know. I’m trying not to think about it, really. I wish we’d never gone.”

For a while she’s silent. Her weight rocks back and forth, the pressure on my chest alternating from left to right then back again for a long time until I fall back asleep.

***
When we wake the next morning there is a note just in front of the door on the ground from Michael Kellerin addressed to my wife, apologizing for the spectacle he showed us the day before. I read it in silence then show it to her.

“That’s kind of him, don’t you think?” she asks.

We have breakfast in the hotel’s dining room. She eats in silence while I read the paper anxiously, not paying attention at all to what I’m reading. A young boy comes to the table and introduces himself as the Mayor’s assistant (he looks no older than ten) and says that he will escort me to the wall today where I will begin painting. He says all my supplies are waiting for me at the site, and since I am dressed already I stand, kiss my wife goodbye (she gives me a half-smile and says she loves me) and follow the boy into the bright air of the morning, where I walk with my eyes squinted and head down. The light filters through clouds in a haze. While we walk the boy orbits my feet like a small dog, so that I have to watch my step in case I might trip over him. I am so excited I have forgotten to bring myself food for lunch, and because I was able to eat so little at breakfast already my stomach is beginning to ache.

***

The wall is far larger than I imagined. The southernmost side of the enormous building, once a monastery and now the government headquarters—it is like an ocean of brick frozen over, and for a moment I struggle to catch my breath. Already the city has primed the wall with the proper coating, and the white of the polymer is so bright I can barely look at it for more than a few seconds. A pyramid of paint that stands almost twice my height sits off to the side, half-covered by a tarp.
“This should be enough to begin.” the boy explains, “Don’t worry, the rest will arrive as needed.”

There is a crate full of brushes and rollers and a giant Plexiglas ladder for me to stand on.

“But where is the scaffolding? The ladder won’t reach as high as I need. I need the scaffolding I requested.”

“The mayor said not to worry, that the engineer will erect it.”

For the first hour I pace back and forth along the length of the wall, listening to the sounds of the City as it begins its morning chores. Men and women pass by, and tourists walk the streets, huddled together in groups, now and then staring at the pyramid of paint now as if, like most things here, it is a monument to something. Always in the background the ocean sounds. Birds squawk. The wind in the morning comes whipping around the building’s corner and the sun shines almost colorless in the sky through fast moving clouds. I decide to begin in the middle of the wall. Everything has been thought out before I arrived except for this.

Where to begin? In the middle.

***

When I return to the hotel after the first day of painting, I find my wife alone in the dark of our room. She’s drawn all the shades and lies in bed. Her eyes are open. She is awake; her phone is propped up next to her like a weapon. I strip off my clothes in the bathroom and shower, trying to scrub the flecks of paint from my hair and arms. What is she doing? I half expect to learn that after breakfast she came back here and settled herself in, that maybe she has spent all day on her telephone complaining of boredom. I
remember on the train how we talked briefly about a number of things. My wife spoke like she hasn’t in a while, and we talked again about settling down or raising children; we continued to imagine what the extra money might buy us, ignoring our debts, and spoke excitedly about having, once and for all, something resembling the good lives of our richer artist friends. Where do these ideas go? One thought seems to be drowned by another. Instead of wandering about in search of something she stays in bed. Maybe she hasn’t left the room since breakfast. In a way I do not want to know. When she is shiftless my mood turns sour, and in my arms and legs a nervous energy takes hold. I know an argument is looming but I am tired of arguing. It is always the same thing. It has become almost like a rehearsal, these arguments. I will plead with her to be reasonable, to go out, to try and find something that interests her in some way, and she will stay silent, then accuse me of belittling her, of trying to control her in some way, and I will tell her that all I want for her is happiness, and she will stare at the nearest wall until I tire from telling her about all the things she once found interesting until she says that she will try then asks me to leave her alone.

So instead of this I shower and move into the dark room to find some clothes. I can hear her breathing in the gloom as I rummage for a pair of pants in one of the many suitcases we have yet to unpack. If I can help it, I think, this will be a night of silence.

***

In the morning, I awake to find my wife missing from our hotel room. On the bathroom mirror she’s left a note that says simply, Went to find something to do, Love you. I pull it off of the mirror and place it on the counter next to the porcelain sink and puzzle over it, wondering what this might mean, then decide to get ready for the day,
maybe walk down to the kitchen to get breakfast and read the *Times*. When’s she not
returned by the end of breakfast, instead of going to the wall, I set out to look for her (my
arms are sore from yesterday. It will take some time to get used to the labor again), and I
smile a little to myself, half imagining she’s somehow already found work, maybe with
the ladies at the tourist office. I picture her at this moment wandering with the foreigners
round the underside of the City Castle, turning her head this way and that as the guide
points out the ancient abutments here and there, asking the odd question with her delicate
half-smile, maybe she’s gone just to make light of my telling her it might do her good.

After walking aimlessly around the City, I wander into a bar and sit down for a
while, half-thinking that when the tourists begin to pour in I’ll ask them if any of the tour
guides they’ve seen resemble my wife, but no one comes and eventually I wander back
out into the street, rubbing my eyes, determined to find her.

I find her outside the factory, just before the cliffs drop into the sea, where we’ve
been told the workers’ wives curse the air and the sea and the land and their bodies,
which are tired. My wife’s wearing the scarf I gave her last holiday, something I found in
Dublin just after our wedding; it’s wrapped loosely around her pale, pretty neck, and
she’s on her knees, thrusting a small shovel into the ground. She’s an impressionable girl,
and when I arrive there’s already a small round hole in front of her, and she’s talking
gently to the other women.

I stand next to her and speak.

“Do you think this is the good life?” I wear sunglasses and stand over her,
holding a warm glass of beer (I’m pretty drunk, really). White birds fly across the sky,
and the sun shines near-white through meager clouds. She looks up.
“I don’t understand. Do you mean work?” She puts down the hand shovel and shields the sun from her eyes. “I’m only helping. I was bored so I decided to come see the women for myself and I decided to help.” She picks the shovel up and continues to dig and push aside the chalky soil. “I can do things on my own, you know, even though you think I can’t. I don’t need everything done for me. I’m not averse to work at all. I’m happy here.” She thrusts the small shovel in her hand out at me. “One of them handed me this thing and I simply followed suit. I’m quite capable. Look, you could almost fit your hand in there.”

I meant to say something entirely different, I know, and as soon as I realize that what she said is true, that I could surely fit my entire hand in that hole, I have an urge to tell her that she needn’t have come here, that surely there are better things to occupy her time in this place.

“It’s true. You’re right,” I say, “only I hope you aren’t taking much pleasure in it. I don’t suppose you’re helping them much by digging my grave.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m not much help but I enjoy the company. I’m thinking of staying for the day.”

Listening to the faint crunch of the earth as the women break through it, deeper and deeper, some of them kneeling inside holes, their heads barely visible they’ve dug so deep, I tell her we can leave if she is unhappy.

“We’ll go somewhere else,” I say. “We’ll go back to Lille if you like. You liked Lille when we were there, and the work I had was good. I’ll find something else. Let’s go to back to Lille, darling.”

“You’re just saying that. I know we can’t leave.”
“Forget it. I’ve just barely begun painting. We can leave right now,” I say, knowing it’s not true. “Forget it. We’ll go home.”

She purses her lips beautifully, shakes her head no, and waves me away.

***

The next few days I am in bed at the hotel before she is. I wake early every morning and eat alone while my wife continues to sleep upstairs. I read the paper and let my brain push itself out of the fog of drowsiness then begin the walk toward the wall. I walk very fast at it, trying to meet it headlong with the force of my own body, as if on the short journey from the hotel to its face I am gathering up steam in order that I might not be continually shocked by its largeness. I attack the section I have left purposefully unfinished the night before with renewed vigor, maybe changing this or that in order to satisfy an unnamed urge. At times I will stop painting completely and walk around the City, half expecting to run into my wife in the market or near the square, only we never meet. My body slowly is adapting to its new chore, and I am less and less sore each day that I continue to hold the brush at this or that angle for so long in the day. The boy who first showed me to the wall now brings me lunch every day. I have no idea where the food comes from but it is good. I mean to ask him where he has the money to pay for lunch every day but I think perhaps that the mayor is feeding me and, though I have not yet met him, I am grateful for his consideration. On days when I’m feeling stifled, when the effort of work is too great, I set out to find my wife, knowing full well where she is, and I find her every time with the women by the factory. Sometimes she is lunching with them out in the field, but most of the time she is working at what I assume is my grave, and her progress toward its completion very nearly mirrors my own with the mural. It is
getting larger every day, and now when I visit I see that I could surely fit my head in its mouth. I return to the hotel and clean up and rest on the bed for almost an hour before she comes through the door, half covered in dust. She enters slowly and greets me sometimes with a smile, and I do not ask her a thing. In truth I have no idea what is going on. We barely talk. I will tell her a little about my progress and she will tell of whatever news she has learned from the women, pieces of gossip about couples, whose names I never recognize, though mainly she talks about the women and their sadness, how they feel betrayed by their husbands, who apparently do not want them but, inexplicably, keep them in their houses, and I cannot tell if her updates on my own grave, on the act of her digging, are part of some irony that I am meant to grasp. I do not pretend to understand.

***

Every day I walk out to the mural and every day the night’s damage is different. This morning there’s a smiley face with something vulgar in its mouth. The mural is three weeks in the making and this thing has been spray-painted on, right in the middle of the scene I just finished the day before, where a Roman soldier stands on top of a ruined battlement, fending off a horde of unkempt men with a laser gun. It is the first scene of the mural that I’ve finished, which starts right in the middle of the southernmost wall of the Maison Dieu, and I continue out from the middle in both directions, so that the work spreads slowly out from its center. The piece concerns the synthesis of history in The City, an illustration of the past meeting the future headlong, and the Mayor’s boy servant continually interrupts me in my work to give it praise, though I have barely started. When I begin to paint over the mark I reach up with my brush and somehow bang my elbow
against the brick and the brush falls into the dirt, and anger wells up inside at the childishness of this thing on my wall, and I walk away to rest for the day.

***

When I wake the next day there is a note from Michael Kellerin to my wife beneath our hotel door, saying that if she would not mind he would like to photograph her with some of the wives on the cliff, and I throw the note in the bedroom wastebasket and the phone rings and I pick it up and Mayor Boc is on the other end saying he’s waiting for me in the lobby downstairs. With my wife still asleep I dress and go down. He’s a smallish man and slightly overweight, so that his suit stretches around him and seems in places ready to burst, as the skin of a plum might look once it begins to decay. His brown hair is parted in the middle and well oiled, in the old fashion, and his soft face seems molded into an expression of bemusement. He assures me of my safety, and we talk for some time, mainly about the content of my commission, which he takes much delight in, and he speaks about the vandalism only in relation to the implementation of the Crime Reduction Strategy he says has just passed. I can tell he’s trying to be reassuring if only in order to quell my distress, maybe make the work easier, but it has the opposite effect and I picture myself being beaten to death while I gloss the *City: the Bronze-Galactic Age* section of the mural. Then he turns the subject to the Indoor Cricket Trials being held in a neighboring town. One of the local crews is faring well, he says. Suddenly he’s serious. He sips his tea delicately and brings himself closer to the table, his demeanor in flux, his face still bemused.

“Apropos of these things, my mission is to make the City new again. Some may not understand, and I can see why. But we must be capable of extirpation. New desires
must be cultivated. ‘To pull out and make new’ is my motto. Like a fire does the forest through which it burns.” He waves his hands in the air as if the things are in front of his face, and he will merely brush them away.

I’m wondering if my wife is awake yet, if she is bathing, washing her hair, or maybe dressing herself for the day. I picture her escaping through a window, piling pillows onto the bed in the shape of a person to make it seem as if she’s still there. I picture her escaping to throw more dirt out of my grave, trying to get the proportions just right so that I might better fit in there. She says the work keeps her occupied, that it calms her mind. Then I think maybe she hasn’t yet left, that she’s upstairs still with the television on, sitting in bed and doing the day’s crossword from the Times.

The mayor laughs wildly and from his pocket pulls out a large document.

“Our five-year plan,” he says, spreading it out on the table where the jam and the bread and the cream soaked right through it in greasy spots. While I examine it he breathes heavily and murmurs under his breath. From what I can see—and I cannot discern much—the plan includes a great many things, including an ornate centerpiece for the city that is to sit in its central garden, and in structure resembles a gigantic calliope, an enormous wailing thing. He points directly at the illustration and taps at it, to where his finger might break through the paper.

“This is it. This here.” He continues pointing to the calliope. “Have you seen it?” I shake my head, somewhat bewildered. “We’ll have to show you, then. You must see it. Of course you will see it.”

***
That afternoon I find her outside the factory again, only instead of digging my grave, she’s passing out nighties and pink lace to the wives, who’ve taken lunch just beyond the factory beneath a grove. The women stretch and eat in the shade. Dirt covers their hands. Into each of their palms the lace goes, and my wife is draping it around their necks and smiling, looking each in the eye while they stare at one another. Lace in their hands, the straps of the lingerie strung around their thick shoulders, they look like statues, the graffiti of lace littering their bodies. I walk over to protest and some of them begin to weep in the shade, all over the pink lace and the silk of the lingerie, until the chalk of the cliffs runs over their faces in rivulets, drawing white rivers down their sun burnt cheeks, and I draw back, confused by the commotion, and my wife is telling me to go away and starts toward me in such a rush that she trips and falls, and when I run to help her up and apologize, she pushes past me toward the City, and all of a sudden I’m left behind with all these plump, ruddy women in their lingerie struggling to catch up with her.

***

She walks the length of the mural, pausing now and then, taking stock of the painting while I step back and watch; it’s almost twenty-five meters long now, and in places about fifteen meters high, and there are roughly eight of the thirty scenes finished, each illustrating a period from the City’s history, starting from the beginning of the world and ending far in the future in the year three thousand. I’m standing right in the middle, where I first began, touching up a spot near the Arthurian Middle Ages, where this morning I walked up to see that the vandals had spray-painted breasts over top the clothes of several damsels. She makes it down to where the sketch is for the fish crawling up out of the sea onto land and walks back hurriedly and speaks.
“I think I’m going away for a few days,” she says. “You probably think I’m crazy, but I might go North for a few days to be alone.”

Suddenly, I’m thinking of us on our honeymoon in Lisbon, of when we’d gotten so drunk in our room that we could hardly see straight and how we laughed when the porters came to our room with all the food we’d ordered. We laughed because we didn’t have the money to pay for any of it and we didn’t care. We made love all week and ate whatever we liked, and when the week’s end came, we phoned her parents for money and they told her again that she’d made a mistake marrying out of her class, so we ran from the hotel, me carrying her expensive suitcases across the street to the car, half of her things trailing out of them, my own things left behind in the room. What happened to that? Where did that go? I’d always thought, in spite of the naïveté of it, that our lives would be fabulous, really.

Now her arms are across her chest, her hands pressed beneath them against her chest. She looks beautiful.

“‘I’m leaving for a few days,’” she says again.

“But you don’t mean it. Why would you go?”

“What?”

“I said why?”

“I don’t know. I need time to myself, I think. It’s not you. I’m just tired all of the time. I’ve been trying to care for those women, and it’s made me tired.”

“But how will you get anywhere? Are you walking?”

“Michael’s said that he would lend me his car. The one I drove here, see.” She points to a blue sedan she’d driven up in. I hadn’t even noticed it before now.
“Why would he lend you his car?”

“I asked him.”

“Oh.”

“Look, it will just be for a few days. I just haven’t had any rest, even in Lille I hadn’t had any rest. I’m sorry your feelings are hurt, but you think it’s sweet to come find me every opportunity you get, and it’s not. You’re behaving like the old men we see in the park at home, clucking at their wives all the time, and I won’t have it. You’re barely aware of it you’re so caught up. I’m just tired.”

“But where will you stay?” I say. “You can’t just leave me here alone.”

“I’ll leave a number where you can reach me. I’ll leave it at the hotel,” she says, and then she turns her back and walks to the car and starts the engine and drives off as I call after her, a faint panic in my throat.

***

With my wife gone, I sleep very little. It seems to me that a gaping hole might at any moment erupt through the floor of our hotel to devour me. Anxiously, I await the telltale shake of rotting lumber and brace myself for the worst: gas leak, electrical fire, natural disasters. During the night my imagination reigns without censure and, of all things, I dream of penguins thrusting knives into their own bellies. I hand get-well cards to all, even to crying children that appear from nowhere, and everyone says, “Thank you, kind sir,” like I’m in a Dickens novel. I awake and in the dull memory of sleeplessness I become convinced my wife is in the room, and, not wishing to wake her with the bizarre tale of my dream, I walk out to the stoop to smoke and wait for her to call me back inside.
If she needs anything, I think, I will go, but when there’s no call, I realize how foolish I am and return to bed.

Now that she’s been gone for five days, it’s my wife’s face I remember least, and a great guilt hangs over me.

***

Before we’d even arrived in the City I’d been invited by the Mayor to attend the Invasion, held on the downs by the factory. The children of the City hold the reenactment every year, gathering in groups to replicate the Invasion of 1066, so on Saturday, with my wife still gone, I make up my mind to go. When I arrive there’s already a large group of people gathered to one side and the children are already forming their two sides some yards away, each side huddled together, closer to the water, with the new fighters ambling their way toward them as they arrived.

I can see Michael Kellerin standing with the rest of the crowd, his body among the workers of the factory and their wives, who stare forlornly at their children, the chalk of their husbands’ graves rinsed from their palms. It’s easy to see the workers eyeing one another, maybe wondering who’s going to be the first to begin the fighting and the breaking into tears come Monday. More attention, though, comes to rest on the children, who stand in even greater numbers now, some in the uniform of the British, some in the uniform of the French, on opposite sides of the great down to the left of the factory, just before the cliffs. They’re scratching their heads and wiping their noses, the little generals bickering with playmates about who’s going to be the first to give the signal to attack. After some time it seems that the entire town has arrived. People stamp footprints in the wet ground. Faces fold together and quiver, and their clothing waves in the wind in the
same direction, as if we are a flock of birds turning in formation. A small group of tourists, a family from Newfoundland, beckon Michael Kellerin into their midst and ask if he might take their picture.

The eldest of the group, a long-faced woman in a pleated woolen skirt, hands him a camera and points wordlessly to the shutter. With his back to the war and its children, he stands in front of the group while they work to assemble themselves into rows, the shortest being sorted out and pushed to the front as the tallest stands back behind the bunch.

A bugle sounds over the down and the waves swallow it in their noise, and the war begins with a scream from both sides that rises into the air until it too is swallowed. One wan smile hangs on the faces of the family, their little teeth shining in the lens of the camera, looking ready for the bulb to flash, signaling that the ordeal is over. The war, we all could see, was behind him, the sound of little feet in the grass surrounds us. Plumes of smoke from the exhaust of their weapons flies overhead, above the smiling family, and Michael is working the focus as his own photos whistle in the wind, and I imagine the plumes of smoke from the weapons, the wan smiles of the Newfoundlanders dulled then sharpened, dulled then sharpened until the picture is clear. Before he presses the shutter I close my eyes and imagine the eldest woman and her pleated skirt in the front, her lips thin across small teeth, her eyes gazing out past Michael and the camera and the scene at his back, where a child in French uniform, newly slain, refuses to play dead and instead stands, crying in the middle of several small Englishmen, who cajole the poor boy into kneeling, at least, in the grass.
When I open my eyes all I see are Kellerin’s photos, the blacks and whites like the feathers of a giant bird. There’s one of him, a younger version of him, standing with a rifle in front of The City Castle. Another at the Maison Dieu, the monastery where, he’d told us, his outfit was quartered during the World War. I catch a glimpse of another on his right shoulder, pinned to his wool blazer. It’s him again, the same age as before, with another man on the cliffs in the midst of a morning storm, then on his leg near his knee, in uniform, with a girl dancing, and then another among the thousands there must have been, resting on the edge of his sleeve: a single photo of a nude girl on a four-poster bed with her arms wrapped round herself, brown haired, her body small on the enormous bed, freckles dotting the bridge of her nose, a tongue wagging out of the pink mouth I think I recognize as my wife’s.

All of a sudden there is a sound like giant bees and a pack of teenagers on dirt bikes comes careening through the scene, riding right through the crowd and into the middle of the children’s Invasion, where the French are being driven slowly back toward the ocean. One of the teens picks up a young foot soldier, who bats at him with his cardboard sword, and carries him some twenty yards then drops him, going full throttle, and the boy rolls and rolls and rolls some more. The teenagers are whooping and screaming over the sound of the bikes. For a while everyone is still, watching the bikes roll around, zipping this way and that, watching the teenagers circle their children, ruining the war, then some of the parents are after the teenagers, running head on toward the bikes trying to tackle them or knock them over. In the rush I panic, and when two more on bikes come running through the crowd again, scattering the Newfoundlanders, I freeze in front of one while he motors at me, then, picturing for a moment my wife atop a
stranger’s bed, I become furious, side-step the youth and make my way toward Kellerin. When I come in front of him I can’t speak, I do not know why, and I begin to tear his photographs from his body and strike him. His eyes are inches from my mine and I can see the terror in them. I thrust the pictures in his face as he cowers, crying out for help. He’s an older man, in his late fifties perhaps, and though he’s a veteran he doesn’t fight back, and though I’m weak I strike him and strike him until some of the men from the crowd pull me away, giving him time to flee.

The sound of the motorbikes makes my head vibrate. I’ve grabbed a number of things from his coat and they sit at my feet, some skipping away along the grass. I open my hand and look again at the picture I’m holding. A shadow is draped across the bed, the photographer, I assume, and the room resembles one of the fancier suites one might stay at in the center of the City, away from the smaller hotel where we stay. Somewhere behind me I can hear the children crying, and as I stare at the picture a great guilt begins to form in my chest. It starts in my lungs and makes my chest feel light. The woman in the picture is not my wife. It is very plain. She’s just a girl. A stranger.

The workers have pinned down a number of the boys and are punching them in their stomachs, are still punching them when the police arrive. I begin to walk home, leaving the picture on the ground with the others where it will be blown off the cliffs and into the water.

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When my wife returns some days later I’ve about finished the mural. Much has happened. Just the other day the workers locked themselves in the factory and without
warning set fire to it. Now the women parade through the streets in the lingerie my wife gave them, begging for alms and bewailing their husbands’ deaths. There is little that can be done, though the people of the City have set up a fund for the wives, not one has accepted the charity. It seems in many ways, for the City at least, to have been a disaster relatively self-contained, as a flame might die beneath a glass because of want of oxygen.

I’m touching up the mural’s final scene, where the City ascends into the light of God’s Glory with rocket thrusters that have been placed beneath the earth’s crust, spiriting the City and its futuristically dressed inhabitants to eternal splendor. I’m touching up the halos of the robot servants, when she comes up behind me.

Soon, we’re curled up on the floor of our room in the hotel, kissing one another’s necks. She says that there is a wild unhappiness within her. That stones cannot break it, and through the damp air her voice wavers, and she asks for forgiveness, and I imagine that I have wronged her and apologize. She’s heard what has happened, but though it bears down on us, we can think of nothing but ourselves. We swear to one another that we will never err again, and in the afternoon, we pass the women and the efforts of their work and make our way down toward the beach, intent upon washing away our sorrow before our departure. Experienced swimmers, we wade into the waters until we become accustomed to the cold, then lie on our backs, letting the current move beneath us, letting the water tickle our feet and ears as it laps around us. We stare back at the shore and the white of the cliffs, which seem to loom over us, growing until we can see little else. Then we’re gradually being swept south along the coast until, raising our heads, we look back at the white cliffs, which to us looks much like a moon settling on the distant shore, and
we stare for some time without desire at the sky, the clouds, the water, until we tire and return to shore.
THE WAR

This town is destroying itself and my wife still wants to stay separated. She doesn’t know what she wants, but she says it’s better for the baby this way. She says the baby wants the separation. She says since she caught me in the grips of my piano teacher, this blonde woman who teaches music at the middle school named Sandy Mettinger, she can’t stand to be around me, can’t even bear to keep me around for protection in case all those men loitering around town—laid off from the factory I once managed—decide to try to take her and my baby away, in case they decide to shake off their sadness and dole out the hurt. It’s started already. The shift supervisor, Dewey Redding, lost his wife Julia to them less than a week ago. After hearing the front door slam he got to the bedroom window just in time to see Julia chucking her red leather suitcase into the trunk of this gentleman’s Nissan, and later Dewey found the note pinned to the refrigerator, which said only that she was leaving the old for the new, that an opportunity for change was desired and found. Au Revoir and all that.

And there are worse things. Just last month the men killed the owner’s nephew. They did it right in the street, and the man died with his trench coat swirling around him, falling over him as if a veil, falling right under the glow of the lamps like in a movie. I can go on—just look at Wofford’s Sweet Shoppe, how they smashed the windows, threw pinafores and chocolate birds into the street and danced all around. It’ll only get worse. It’s in their eyes and looks not too far away.
All I want from my wife is forgiveness, anything to acknowledge the full, stately accommodation of penitence in my heart. This is not too much to ask, I think. That thing with the piano teacher wasn’t even what an affair should be. It was a making up for things, a catharsis. One day I am hammering out Bach’s Partita Four—after six months of lessons at thirty bucks a pop I got to be pretty good—and Sandy Mettinger is standing over me, beaming because I am, at thirty-seven years of age, her best pupil. She loops around from behind me and in one motion sets herself down upon the bench just before my left hand cramps from having to crabwalk its way down the lower register. I stop and turn and adjust myself so that I’m looking right at her. I can see the hair on her legs where her skirt meets the thigh, and I almost laugh out loud. Already I see it looming, the transgression. I see myself in the black of her eye, and I’m ridiculous, needy. Then from the reading light placed just above the sheet music there appears a dim halo around her head.

Her husband died last spring in a motorcycle accident on his way home from the plant. He was a friend of mine. We played darts together on Saturdays at Stokes in the summer and went to see the minor leaguers play ball over in Trenton now and then. This is why the piano lessons. This is why the thirty-dollars an hour.

Her lips part and she begins to speak.

“With forty more years practice,” she says, “you could be a concert pianist.” I look her over, feeling a pang in my chest. She cocks her head a bit. I’ve never looked at her like this before.

“I’ll be dead by then,” I say.
She took my head in her hands, which shook, and began to kiss me all over my face. The next thing I know I was clutching her to me, receiving from her what my wife, since our baby, had not given me in ages. I was half crazed. I couldn’t see past my prick for the lust in my head. That week my wife got a letter in the mail courtesy of Sandy, who, because of a low tolerance for guilt, related our entanglement to my wife in extraordinary detail, calling on her for a measure of restraint she was not capable of herself, saying I had pushed her too far in a moment of need, that I was to blame.

Now, my wife walks with the baby in the downtown park most mornings, and, though she must know I come to see her and the baby, surely, I trail unseen, hiding behind trees, lending unbidden support to further mother-daughter bonding. She keeps walking, minding her own business, not seeing some of the factory men hiding behind the trees in front of her. I stumble behind, careful not to trip on root or rock, weaving my way behind her and clomping on broken sticks, making a racket to ward off sudden attack. Since my wife and I separated these factory men swarm about her and our baby, though I’ve tried to keep them at bay. They’re hurting for womanly company. Saturdays they’re all out in a swarm harassing everyone, baying like dogs, the smell of cheap musk and beer trailing them like exhaust. It’s in their heads that they can assuage the pain of unemployment if they bolster themselves among a number of Ladies and Babies. Luckily, their wooing tactics are questionable. They are sweet men and all, but they need practice.

Everyone, including my wife, knows these fellows as friends first. They come from Eddy, PA as temp workers and never went home. They have families in Eddy, most of them, but they refuse to go back, saying the statistics of unemployment are worse
there. We could name each and every one just as if they’d lined up at the Rotary for a spaghetti dinner we’d decided to attend. There is Mark Tecce, Robin Cole, Bruce Walsh, James Hinkle, James Copenhaver, Gary Holdstedt, Walt Huff and so on. We could shake hands and ask them by name how their parents are faring through all this.

When I run across them, a few here and there, they tell me since my wife and I are separated they’ve got just as much a right to her as anyone else, saying that the married men in town need to share the spoils. They say, as men in hardship would, that they deserve love like anybody else, and that they are willing to take it by force if necessary.

Who is there to explain the wrong-headedness of logic like that? If I could find that person I would hire him. I would pay him well. I’d take him around the world, country to country, in a box and at every place unleash peace unto the world.

I tell them, for my wife’s benefit—to keep her away from these people because I still love her—that she’s not worth having.

Just next time you see her, look at her, I say, she’ll only attract attention. But they ignore me as if it didn’t matter either way.

They say they’re building a new way for things to be. That they are offering my wife and child a chance to belong or get out. For me, they say, they’ve nothing, just because I managed the damn factory. They’ve put placards around town that read, “The old will find their home,” and beneath the writing there rests a large portrait of a tombstone that says Old Town across its face. Already they want to break down the thing that gave them life. Surely they know that steel founded this town. All they know is steel. Even with the factory now gone, all they’ll make is a wrongheaded steel town, minus the
steel, minus the foundation it needs to survive, and generations from now, when it fails, they will not even know what was wrong.

My wife doesn’t realize it but those factory men are trying to get her and the baby. She treats them friendly, lets them into the house, where I’m not even allowed, and listens to their lectures on the Labor Question and smiles now and then. Little does she know they’re crucifying the families of the owners on the other side of town. This is a shit town with a shit war. I’m neutral. I managed the factory when they closed it. The company brought in these fellows to relocate the plant to St. Louis, and we had to teach a bunch of them how to do our jobs, and after a few weeks, they left. One day we all show up to work as usual to find the gate barred, and a couple days later those boys showed up on the streets, walking round in packs like hyena, like vermin. I say it’s the times, and they have to get used to it while they’re young. Some people are put on this earth just to take things from you. It’s something to learn about. Who’s to blame the owners anyway, when there’s a buck involved? Who’s to stop it in this town?

This is the worst arboretum ever, and all around me whirls the sound of traffic, the hum of tires treading pavement, engines coughing. The gardens are like pillboxes, and all they hold are American Beauties gone tawny, stripped of petals and left to choke on their own brambles. Following her, I see her lovely ankle beneath her hemline, the smooth pale skin of her neck when the wind blows her hair about. Then, all of a sudden on the ground there’s a trench coat, and I pick it up, but it is a trick, and this fellow that I know that worked the bit press at the factory lunges at me from beneath it holding a
broken bottle and demanding money, and I run away as best I can then have to double back through the brush and whatnot with my chest heaving, my lungs turned stiff. By the time I get back to where my wife and baby are at, she’s walking out into an open field and keeps walking, and I’m plain out of cover, left behind, fixed. See her there walking along the cracked asphalt of the trail, leaving me standing at the edge of this damn arboretum, love-sick for my baby, panting behind a half-dead oak with my field glasses in hand, a beret on my head.

Why my wife comes to the arboretum, I have no idea. I think she harbors some romanticism for it, though I cannot say why. We weren’t even born in this town, never grew up here, and still we stay.

Scattered around the park are machine parts those boys have stripped from the factory floor before the company could grab and move them. Here and there sit limbs of strangled conifers and deciduous, rotting nettles. There’s a moss killing all the trees, strangling them, and some of the men, the few whose houses were taken with their jobs, have taken to drinking here at night; sometimes I come by, and they sit, guffawing at my mess and kidding me about my beret. I mean, we’ve worked together, all of us. It’s not personal. I’m a poet and a Methodist, I tell them, raised on the fruits of forgiveness.

My wife loves poetry, so I leave writing I find on our doorstep, like thrown out receipts with a verse or two I scribble down from this book I have from City College called *The Verse of Lovers, for Lovers of Verse*. Still, she won’t have any of it, and in my mailbox I get envelopes with the scraps of what I’ve left her in them, all torn up or burned. There was a time two years ago, just after we’d bought the house, when we’d
wake up together before work in the mornings and make our coffee quick, put our thick coats on, and run and walk and skip to the track at the high school to watch the morning practice runs. We’d sit in the stands nuzzling our heads together, sometimes sitting a few feet apart to take in the beauty, and watch the kids jog and stretch as they made their way around the track, prancing through the mist like deer. If we sat still enough we could feel the earth moving beneath us. We could listen to the water in the air evaporate during the approach of the morning sun.

One day after I’m done trailing my wife, I’m ambling back through the park headed towards the rental I’ve got some blocks away, and one of the men comes out from behind a sycamore holding a bottle of Dose One Liquor and claiming to like the nub on top of my hat, but it’s a familiar jab, and I know better and don’t say much while the others hidden around us laugh quietly. They’re mendicant all of them, and it comes down to money, even when they’re heckling. One of them steps out and stands on his head, his legs waving against the trunk of a tree. He flexes acrobatic-like then asks for change. Once, when drunk, a few days after my wife kicked me out, I was feeling destitute and tried to join them. I bought a six-pack and went wandering around, but when I stumbled onto a group of them, they said the area was occupied, and some black fellow snuck up behind me and kicked me in the ass and called me names.

This whole town is ruined and won’t have me. Negligence abounds. Adolescences run rampant. Teenage girls raise their skirts over their heads in public and wiggle, laughing, and boys strafe the sidewalks, careen through the streets with air pistols mimicking the television, while their parents hunker down in their homes. The sewers are
ruined. What little police we had left town or took sides. The houses are indecorous, the lawns of the rich overrun with thistle and jack weed because the rich have left town. The water tower is crooked, half the stores busted open. The middle-aged wonder about the murk in the air, wonder about boils, baldness, podiatry.

Did I mention my wife is a sure beauty? She is. She’s a darling, and our baby looks just like her mother. The baby has tufts of brown hair, bright green eyes. This is no place for a baby surely. That baby we have, her name was Anastasia but since we’ve separated her mother changed it. Now the baby’s name is Helen. Helen is no name for a baby. I love my wife but I believe she is putting on some weight. On Thursday, after having spent Wednesday night at my rental reading and dreaming and having nightmares, I wake and go to our house and trail my wife again. She’s walking with the baby, pushing it in front of her in a stroller, and I feel like I can barely see the stroller in front of her. I imagine that my wife is putting on weight so I can barely see my own baby. I catch a glimpse between two parting calf’s mid stride, parted just so until they clip back closed like scissors over and over. Part of the stroller is seen, and a hand waving now and then, and I suppose it is our baby’s hand. Twice I see the supposed hand of Anastasia, Helen.

Saturday I’m in a heap of trees with my copy of The Verse of Lovers and my field glasses, and she’s walking solo, without the baby, and I don’t know where the baby is, which is worrisome. Suddenly she turns around and starts walking straight at me, and I jump behind this decrepit pear tree, and she stands nearby, huffing and puffing to let me know she knows I’m there, then begins to speak, saying she’s been thinking a great deal,
then says that we need to repair the truth in our love, that she doesn’t believe we have truth in our love anymore, that it’s broken and that she doesn’t know how to fix it. I don’t know what she’s talking about, so I say so.

In reply, she says, “Please get out from behind that tree.”

I do. I step out with my head down, like a child wandering onto a lit stage for the first time.

“Sorry,” I say.

“I’m saying that I could trust you once, and that now I don’t feel like I can.”

Suddenly I realize where our baby is. Since our separation my wife started leaving her with this sitter, who I suspect is a drunk, but my wife doesn’t see it.

“But you know how much I love you? I don’t understand. We can work on things together. Please, I just want to be with you and Anastasia again.”

“Her name is Helen, Nathan. And I know that you love me, but I still can’t get over it. I go to sleep and see you with her every night in my head, and I can’t help but wonder if there’s something you need that you’re not going to find with us again, and it just makes me almost hate you to think of it all.”

I tell her again how much I love her, trying not get choked up, how much I miss my daughter, but I can see she’s not listening. I ask her when I can come back, when I can see my baby girl, and she puts her hands on her hips and says the baby’s not ready yet.

“I’m just not sure I can depend on you. We need more time,” she says.

I don’t say a thing. I turn around and retreat back behind the tree then count to eighty to calm myself and step out and she’s gone. I run to our home as fast as I can and
there the baby is with that drunken sitter, my daughter splayed out on the floor and crying when it’s supposed to be her nap time. I’ve told my wife over and over that that sitter is no good, that the child’s welfare may be in danger, but no one listens, so I’m picking the baby up off of the floor and almost crying because I haven’t held her in so long, and the sitter, who is watching the television absentmindedly, nods politely, then gets up from the couch and watches me through narrowed eyes as I take the baby upstairs and change it, thinking all the while that I could just take her and run. I’m squeezing my cheek against her hers, then singing her to sleep as she flails her arms, all the while trying to figure out which would damage the baby less, calling her by her first name or by the new name her mother gave her and not really knowing the answer, so alternating between the two, sometimes saying Anastasia, Anastasia, and at other saying Helen, though the word sounds wrong.

The next thing I’m out of the house and leg up in a tree in the backyard watching my wife come home with some groceries from the market. She pays the sitter, who seems to say nothing, then puts some popcorn in the microwave and walks slowly through the house, turning on every light she passes as she makes her way slowly upstairs. Then she’s back downstairs, crying at the table and eating popcorn from a cereal bowl. I adjust my beret and try to flip through the poetry book to find something of value that I could write to leave her as a token of my love and support, and instead, worry about the stability of the child-proof ties that I fixed on to the sink cabinet when I see that some of the factory men have been to the house again. I can tell because there’s a bundt cake on the kitchen counter, and my wife does not bake, nor does she like bundt cake, and every time they
come they bring her one, because their ways of wooing are not so honed. I never said those boys were smart. It doesn’t matter. It’s the dumb you have to worry about.

Above my head I can see the moon pale in the daylight, shaking in the sky.

Somehow I fall asleep and have nightmares that my old factory boys are breaking into the house to do my wife favors, like vacuuming and dusting, and when I wake I’m still in the bough of the tree in my backyard, and my clothes are damp, and Charlie Vance from machinery is in my kitchen making my wife dinner while she cries and dabs at her mascara.

That night, to be hospitable I suppose, my wife holds a small get together for some of the lifers from the factory, who are a ragged lot and elderly mostly, life-long residents and council members some of them. They harbor nasty thoughts and feel compelled to tell one another about them in front of my wife, telling darkie jokes and drinking all the booze in the house. One of them plays Danny Boy on my Yamaha piano, pounding on the keys while the others strangle the words in their chapped little mouths. I attend in costume, disguised as a dog so that I can keep watch over my wife and the baby. I’d not expected to gain admittance but I manage to slip through the back entrance to our garage, slinking my way into the party through the kitchen, where my wife is cutting up some carrots for a dip. She takes one look at me, clicks her tongue, and then turns back around, deciding to ignore me completely. I don’t say a thing. I just nod then trot out into the den. No one even looks in my direction the whole night. It’s like I’m so little of a threat I’m not worth belching on.

The party runs smoothly for the most part. I lie in front of the fireplace on the cool brick until one of the men gets fresh with my wife and grabs her by the ass as she trails
through the den with a tray of hors d’oeuvres. I run up and bark and bite at his ankles, and he starts looking all around for help but everyone’s dedicated to ignoring me no matter what, and they let me pretty much run him out.

When everyone’s finally gone, stinking of skin and alcohol, my wife drives me from the house with a broom that whisks in my face, and, too tired to break character and risk confrontation, I yelp and scurry out into the yard and lie down in the grass when she turns on the sprinklers.

Why can’t things be like they used to? I remember a time, when we were first married ten years ago, that we got drunk together and drove her mother’s car into a ditch then sat and waited for the police to come and pick us up, and no one came. We got out of the car and checked each other out to make sure nothing was hurt too bad then lay in a wheat field and did nothing.
MOUNT FUJI

Had Professor Humboldt found in his new surroundings a hospitable face, a countenance that could mirror the intensity of Humboldt’s longing for friendship, he might have been happy. He might have found a companion. He could have noiselessly continued being the person he was in youth: someone whose demands of life were simple, whose comfort had on occasion stirred mild distrust in the minds of others, who suspected now and then that behind the quiet, intense displays of joy of which he was capable there lay just the opposite, some great sadness hidden within.

Instead, Professor Humboldt, after receiving his doctorate in the middle of life from a quiet college in the Southeast, returned to the area of his childhood home feeling somewhat prodigal and found no one to welcome his arrival. His parents had retired to North Carolina years ago. His sister, Sophia, who was some years younger, who’d settled some miles north in Stockton, seemed relatively nonplussed by his return. After having been apart for so long, Humboldt had secretly hoped, among other things, that they could become closer. Her husband, Lawrence, a wildlife photographer, had run off with his assistant just last year, and Sophia hadn’t been the same since. Humboldt had thought that, if given a chance, he could at least be a friend to her. Before the semester started, just as he was moving in to his new home, she’d made a few breathless calls to check on him, saying that she’d have him up to the house for dinner soon. But then the invitation never came, and soon Humboldt forgot that she’d ever brought it up.
He’d found a quaint house in Morrisville, across the river from the College, just five miles from where he’d spent his youth, and immediately began teaching his first seminar in the language department, where he’d been so warmly received during his visits before the move. The days were difficult. Evidently the department was in crisis and had hidden it well during Humboldt’s visits. He learned that the College had little money, that they had fired their last German Studies professor, who was tenured, because he’d refused to teach more than three classes a semester. He saw that the professors in the department quarreled incessantly, finding it necessary to defend their intellectual enterprises from constant attack, as if each discipline needed to form whole governments, erect recognizable borders. Soon, Professor Humboldt was almost daily repelling attacks from Professors Lawrence and Clarke, who claimed that Russian and French Studies were ontologically sounder pursuits, that Humboldt’s study of Germanic literature amounted to little more than diddling oneself, that he was wasting time.

They’d corner him in his office, make offhand remarks during faculty meetings.

“Who can you find in your Deutsche literature to top the heart of Tolstoy?” Lawrence would say, “Who among your brutes to topple Dostoevsky?”

Professor Humboldt each time would retreat, shuffling his small feet and shrugging his shoulders, waving his hands as he backed away. When Humboldt went to Dean Hillier to complain the old man only shrugged, saying that it had been a problem for some time, that because there was no immediate solution Humboldt should just wait it out, that it would surely pass.
Three weeks into the semester he came home from his Tuesday German Romanticism seminar to find a message from his sister Sophia on the answering machine, saying that she needed a place to stay, that the creditors were there taking her things and she didn’t know who to call. He got in his car immediately and drove the forty miles upriver to her cottage in Stockton, arriving just in time to see the workers close up the rear of a moving van. She was outside on the lawn, her back slightly hunched, tears on her face. He noticed she’d lost weight. Her hair had been cut short. For a moment he thought he could see their mother in her face. After a quick hello, he helped her pack as much as she could fit into his little Peugeot, then took her straight to his place, where he showed her the tiny guestroom of his brick one-story and quietly reveled in his role as the older brother.

At dinnertime he ordered a pizza for the both of them and tried his best to accommodate her needs, asking her every so often if she was comfortable, could she be more comfortable, was there anything he could do.

“No,” she said each time, “there’s nothing.”

She was silent and distant. At the dinner table she stared blankly at the face of the refrigerator and cried now and then, and he tried to comfort her.

“It’s not your fault about the money,” he said. “Things are difficult. How were you to support yourself in that house alone? I can’t imagine. It’s too difficult. Listen, I want you to know you can stay for as long as you like, as long as you need.”

She thanked him by nodding her head and smiling weakly, and they stayed up most of the night drinking. She said she’d been having money trouble ever since Lawrence had left, that it had been a difficult year. She said she was glad Humboldt had
been around to help, and he was immediately happy, though in the back of his mind he began to worry endlessly that he might somehow make things worse. That their being together was a sign of some failure both had in common. He felt ashamed that he had always stood with their parents against her stubborn nature. When she’d married four years ago, their parents had bitterly disapproved, and Humboldt, as in all of his parents’ decisions, had strongly sided with them, and he was sure the irony of her divorce had not been lost on his sister, nor the further hurt of her losing her house because of it. For a few moments, the fact that they were together at all was a sign that neither had done well. Every drink seemed to compound his sense of her, of himself, as if he could regard only her mistakes with clarity, as if the rightness of her was missing in his eyes, and he felt guilt because of it.

After that night he began taking her everywhere, trying to help her, trying to treat her nicely no matter what, not only because of her loss but because he felt it was his duty to make them a family again. Now rather than spend his nights alone watching television or reading his books, he and Sophia drove to the County Theatre for foreign films or went to eat at Trattoria or Catalina’s and ordered whatever seemed exotic to them at the time, things he’d never have done by himself. The stress of work seemed to him to have lessened. He was happier, even if he was only spending time with his divorced younger sister. It was nice to have a woman’s presence in the house. It was the company that mattered.

Soon, Sophia was temping for a local agency, working here and there, and more than anything Professor Humboldt wanted to make sure he was taking proper care of her, giving her the things she needed, so that when the house was dirty he cleaned it, and if
she needed a little money he gave it to her. Sometimes when she wasn’t paying attention he’d stare at her as if in a mirror, seeing the resemblance of himself in her, her features mirroring a feminine version of himself. After she’d been there a month they began to make a habit of driving down to the historical district on Friday nights and walk in and out of the galleries, though Humboldt suspected that she was bored by most of the work. The fourth time down he lost her in a crowd and wandered about helplessly, trying to find her, and it dawned on him that he was adept at losing things, that perhaps their failures revolved around some trait within them that made them unable to hold on to the things dear to them. When he found her finally standing outside of a curio shop talking with an old friend she’d run into, he let her finish out her conversation then claimed that he wasn’t feeling well. He told her they should go home and she trailed behind him to the car.

He told her that he thought she should take some time to figure things out, and she kept insisting that things were figured out pretty well at this point, that if anything it was time to start making new things. In truth, he liked having her around, he liked watching over her, and when now and then she said she’d had enough of his protectiveness, that she was fine and wanted to be left alone, he simply chalked it up to the stress of the divorce, even when she said she was glad she wasn’t married anymore, that she didn’t need a man hovering over her to make sure she was alright. Even so, most of the time, Humboldt felt lucky just to have someone around. Even if that someone brought home another speeding ticket she couldn’t afford to pay, asking him if he’d please take care of it just this once, he thought, *at least this is better than being alone.*
She offered to help more around the house. She said she could pay him rent, just something small so that he didn’t feel taken advantage of, but he flatly refused and told her she was being ridiculous. Slowly, things were changing. Humboldt came home from the school often to find the front door unlocked, sometimes even ajar, and Sophia was nowhere to be found. Things of hers started to disappear. Where before she’d scattered every little thing she owned around the house, one by one the items seemed to disappear, as if perhaps they’d wandered out of the unlocked door on their own, like pets trying to return to an old home. He confronted her about it, demanding to know where her things were going, afraid at first that she was selling her clothes or simply throwing them away out of depression, and she claimed ignorance, saying that he was being paranoid.

“Where on earth would they go?” she said.

She began to stay out late. She’d met a few friends working at different jobs, and began to hang out with some single women and men who went out dancing every week or so. Where she was going Humboldt had no idea. He knew only that for her it seemed easy finding friends. She knew where to go. She was sociable by nature. She wasn’t like him. He suspected she was leaving him by small degrees but convinced himself that Sophia was right. It was anxiety only.

It was a credit to Professor Humboldt that he wore none of his new stress. Even with the idea in his head that Sophia was slowly disappearing, and with the stress around budget time at the College, he tried to keep his suits neat, he ate regularly, read his books. On days when he wasn’t teaching he made a habit of taking long walks in the afternoon. At the end of each week, after his Friday morning classes, he lunched alone downtown, settling himself into a booth at Faulk’s, where almost every week the Trenton Rotarians
held their meetings. Professor Humboldt sat not far from the group of them and listened intently to their talks, each time feeling more and more at home. After two months of lunching he’d heard presentations on everything from the breadth of the organization’s polio charity to a news reporter’s talk about local coverage and its effects on the Trenton small business economy. When their annual elections came up he decided he would show up and run. It was an organization of business folk primarily, but Professor Humboldt didn’t care. It seemed as good a group as any. He would strike out on his own, in his own fashion. He would run for office in their upcoming election.

He was a shoe-in for social coordinator in the Rotary, mainly because he ran unopposed and no one was brash enough to give him a vote of no-confidence. When he nominated himself for the position by carefully slipping his own name into the confidential nominee box that was passed around during one of the November meetings, he found, surprisingly, that he was the only person nominated.

Soon after he began taking up the duties of the position he realized why no one else had wanted it, it was simply too much work, especially for someone with a career and a family, which almost all members had—with the exception of the few elderly members, who weren’t fit for the job in the first place. Humboldt found himself swamped with duties, the most important of which was to organize almost every aspect of the Trenton Rotary Annual Costume Ball, from budget to menu to music. Instead of trying to bow out once he realized how much work there was, he threw himself into it, even getting Sophia to help him keep track of some of the more important things like the guest list and the invitations. And though his teaching at the College was suffering somewhat,
he found that by raiding his file of old lectures he could keep up with the material without having to do much extra work.

Most nights, when he wasn’t waiting up for Sophia to return from wherever or worrying about the rigors of his position in the Rotary, he sat transfixed by the television with a closed book in his lap, his head sagging against the back of his couch. After the first month of watching over Sophia he became interested in a special running on PBS called Gordon’s Geologic Wonders of the World, where Dr. Travis Gordon traveled to the far reaches of wherever, photographing and discussing rare examples of geologic beauty, sharing a narrative of the wonder’s life from birth to present, as if it were a person. Of particular interest to Professor Humboldt was Geologic Wonder number five, Mt. Fuji, a dormant volcano that sat just west of Tokyo in Japan that, to Humboldt, at once seemed far more impressive than wonders 1-4, which, while astounding in their own ways, had not seemed as imposing. What struck Humboldt at once upon seeing the episode, where Dr. Travis Gordon relayed much of the exhaustive history of the volcano while hiking up and down the mountain’s face in jeans and a red kimono, bowing at the waist at every tourist who happened to cross his path, was that, a.) it was the tallest mountain in Japan, rising some 3,776 meters above sea-level, and was almost perfectly symmetrical, and the way they showed it on the television made Humboldt see it rise above the skyline in a way that he’d not seen anything do in his lifetime. b.) it had, in its millions of years of activity, never killed anyone, much unlike its cousin Vesuvius, which had brought ruin to Pompeii. Fuji was something of power to be appreciated the way one appreciates a lion in a zoo, without worry that the nature of the thing would cause harm. For days he thought only of the mountain, blocking out even the concerns of his job and
his sister. He pictured the snow of the mountain. He pictured himself traveling in the Bullet Train to see it loom in the distance. But he had no money to travel. The house had eaten up his savings, and he was deathly afraid of flying anyway.

Late one night while Sophia was out, he found a site on the computer that showed live footage of the mountain. He stayed online for hours watching tourists climb and descend the mountain in droves, waiting every few seconds for the computer to update the image then trying to find how far the group he was watching had advanced. It came to him then, while watching a rather large group move slowly up the mountain, their dark jackets like a small stain on the rock, that he could make it possible. He would see Mt. Fuji. In his head it seemed perfectly acceptable, if only a bit eccentric. And it would be not only for him but for others as well, it could be for Rotary. He would build Fuji so that he could see it immediately, reasonably. He would do it for the Rotary Ball, because he wanted them to see Fuji the way he’d seen it on television that night, as something beyond beauty, massive and powerful, and, in spite of its destructive nature, relatively tame. He would build it for the Rotary Costume Party as a token of friendship between the group and himself, as a sign of thanks for taking him in. It helped in his mind that the Rotary’s most popular service was its exchange program between Japanese and American students.

After making a number of calls, he found a contractor willing to create the fiberglass mountain according to blueprints he drew up, making it in four parts that could be assembled in the ballroom of the hotel the day before. He showed the plans to Sophia at home. He thought that knowing that at least his family was supportive would give him
the confidence he needed to push the project through, but she only stared at the blueprints then looked up at him blankly.

“You’re going to build a mountain? Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s something I want to see. It’s for everyone. I thought you would like it too. Isn’t it beautiful? I taped a special we could watch together about it.”

She rolled her eyes and exhaled deeply, then saw the hurt on his face and drew herself back, trying to be more tender.

“You’re so weird. No, I like it. It’s great, really.”

Had anyone from Rotary intervened he would have stopped immediately, but no one asked where the money was going, and really, he was being perfectly reasonable with his expenditures anyway. He stayed to the budget as close as possible, not taking out a penny extra. And when the Rotary budget came up a little short for some of the details of the mountain he put his own money into the project in order to make sure that he got what he wanted.

The day before the ball he sat at home waiting for the contractor’s call. Humboldt had instructed the man to call him as soon as they were ready to move the structure from the shop to the ballroom so that he could be there to make sure things ran smoothly, and also to see the mountain in the room before anyone else. He called Sophia every half hour until he heard, because she’d promised to leave work to come with him, to see the project he’d been so diligently working on. The first time he called she said she’d bought a red gown to wear to the ball, that she was going as the Queen of Hearts.

“A gown with hearts on it? Do you have the hat too?” Humboldt said.
“No, it’s just a red gown. The rest I’m leaving up to the imagination.”

“But that’s not a costume. That’s just a gown. No one will recognize your costume.”

“I suppose they won’t. Don’t worry about it. Nobody will care. I’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

When next time he called he was told by a receptionist that she’d stepped out for a moment and would be back shortly, and he hung up and slipped back to thinking about the mountain.

Though he’d visited the workshop constantly to witness the progress of the model, he’d not yet seen it put together, and for weeks he’d been unable to think of anything else. All he saw while awake, while sleeping, while eating, was the model of Fuji, the four pieces fitting seamlessly together under the molded ceiling of the Victorian ballroom. As soon as he got the call he tried relaying the message to his sister but a stranger answered again and said she would give the message to Sophia. He told her it was urgent and made the man promise not to forget then hung up and went on his way into downtown Trenton. When he arrived already a half of the mountain was in place. The contractor said it would take them the rest of the evening to place the rest in the room, and Humboldt was content enough to walk around the half-mountain is if he were orbiting a star, walking at a furious pace, unable to take his eyes off the base. He tore himself away at least twice to call Sophia, to demand that she come down and see what he had made, but again only a stranger answered, saying that Sophia had not yet come back from lunch and that they’d relay the message as soon as possible.
When Humboldt finally arrived home the door was unlocked again, and he made up his mind to risk an argument and tell her again to lock up, that it just wasn’t safe. He went into the kitchen and roamed around excitedly, trying to decide what he could eat though he wasn’t feeling hungry when he found a note on the refrigerator door from Sophia, explaining that she was going to be gone for the night, that he was right that she needed some time to think things over, that, most likely, she wasn’t coming back.

Less than fifteen minutes of the way through the Annual Trenton Rotary Costume Ball, Professor Humboldt began to fear that already Sophia had left before they’d had a chance to talk about her coming back home, red rental gown and all. He was worried. Earlier when Humboldt had seen her she was reclining against one of the ballroom walls with her head down, her brilliant gown on, the broad red bell of which swept along the floor when she moved, making its *hush hush hush* sound along the parquet. Horatio, the bank president, was drunk and hitting on her, telling her he was in love with her over and over. She was telling him to go to hell, and the man became angry and half-lunged at her and fell, turning over a tray of hors d’oeuvres in his ostrich costume, causing her to laugh wildly, and Humboldt had to be the one to run over and grab the plump man’s feathers to hold him back, protecting her from the banker’s thin, outstretched hands, from the little teeth behind his full lips. When Humboldt came back, after having calmed the man down, she was gone again, and he began to pace the ballroom floor anxiously, trying to figure out what he might say to her to get her home.

Now, Humboldt wanted to be sure she hadn’t gotten herself in trouble again. Even with her gone he wanted to make sure he was taking proper care of her, and reproached
himself by fearfully picturing her like a child unattended, half-drunk and slinking out the rear door with a drink in hand, getting lost outside in the cold without her jacket, having forgotten to say even a polite goodbye to her brother. So he began asking everyone he recognized, which was difficult, because he recognized almost no one. Humboldt dressed up as the Phantom of the Opera so at least people could recognize part of him, to make conversation easier, but no one seemed to recognize him either way, so he trudged around the party, trying in vain to walk unscathed through the groups of Princesses and Wonderwomen, Vampires and Wolfmen. The music sounded loudly in his ears so that it was hard to hear. He tried to speak over the music, asking a group of men wearing plastic masks meant to resemble former Presidents, who he thought he recognized as the owners of the local minor league baseball team, if they’d seen his sister, when a squeal of feedback from the bandstand silenced him.

Mrs. Constance Bart, Treasurer, had somehow wrested the microphone away from the band mid-song and was telling everyone in the ballroom over the din of the collapsing rhythm section that this year’s Annual Rotary Costume Ball, despite initial pitfalls, was truly a success, in part because of the imagination of Professor Humboldt, who, upon hearing his own name and the following smatter of applause, momentarily forgot about his sister and waved his hands in the air feebly, his cheeks turning red, feeling a bit slighted for not having been given full responsibility for the party’s success. But then he was not really slighted, and in truth, any attention at all is already more than he could bear. He wanted only at this point to discern whether or not his sister was still here.
Not that he hadn’t wanted the attention, because he had. He was pleased with his efforts. Not so much with the monumental quality his efforts lent to the surroundings, but rather with the idea that what he imagined had been made. That he thought of placing a mountain in the center of the ballroom was secondary. That Humboldt’s artificial mountain glistened in the center of the hotel ballroom, its snow, like real snow, scattering light in every direction, this was the prize—his effect on an event that had a finite beginning and end, the fact that he created something that elicited from people a genuine effect, easily witnessed and recognizable as such.

Couples gingerly waltzed around the mountain and praised the ambience it lent. And when, out of the corner of his eye Humboldt had seen Mrs. Bart head for the bandstand, he had waited rapturously, secretly hoping that she might say his name over the loudspeaker so everyone might know that it was he who was responsible for the mountain, and as she weaved her way toward the stage with her knotty hand outstretched as if the microphone might fly to her from afar, he began to rub his hands together uncontrollably, absentmindedly scanning the crowd for his sister’s short brown hair. And then, suddenly, as his hands were in the air, he saw her leaning on the far wall of the room near the exit, clearly drunk, chatting with a group of men dressed as roman gladiators.

From where Humboldt was at the gossamer train of her gown alone made him dizzy, like watching static on television, and she seemed to him to have come from another place, as if she’d been raised in a different household. She looked to him like something immovable and innate, and he remembered almost immediately the strength of her will during the frequent arguments she’d had with their father while growing up, how
unrelenting she’d been about the pettiest things, how in a lot of ways she hadn’t changed much. As a brother, there’d been nothing to protect her from while she was growing up, because she was never vulnerable in that way. When Humboldt was younger he’d felt sorry for her because of her knack for isolating herself from the family, but he also wanted to be like her, to have her strength. He was too eager to please, too weak, and he hadn’t changed. In a way he wanted to hide from her, wanting to further gauge her mood before he directly approached her. Finally, when he walked up to her they hugged tentatively, and when he asked how she was she replied noncommittally, which made him worry. She looked past his shoulder as if already planning her next conversation and spoke.

“Listen, I want you to know, I’m not coming back to the house. I went by and picked up my things earlier. I’m staying at some friends’ house, at Justin and Sue’s place. I just don’t think it’s healthy for either of us for me to be there.”

Humboldt’s tongue clicked nervously against the roof of his mouth. When he tried to speak it came out in one long stream, like a bucket of water spilling over.

“I don’t understand I just walked over to see how you were doing to make sure you were coming home tonight anyway you can’t just leave like that and besides you can’t stay with them Sophie you won’t be able to stay with them long and you’ll end up bouncing around I just don’t think that that’s healthy.”

“I’m sorry, it’s not like I’m not grateful. It’s just not right. It’s not working.”

“How? How is it not working?”

“Look, I don’t want to talk about it anymore. You’re not…I’m just not coming home. I can’t. You can visit me in a few days or something. I’ll leave you the number.”
Suddenly, the whole room was laughing. The sound of it slowly filled the space as the band came to a halt again. Sophia looked at the ground. He turned around. His face went white. To his horror, some of the men dressed as gladiators were trying to climb the mountain. People were telling them to slide down it using their shields. One man’s foot plunged through the base, creating a large hole, while another managed to get halfway up the side, into the mountain’s main crater, but found himself stuck and sat curled up in the thick fiberglass bowl while everyone nearby pointed and laughed, and Humboldt ran to get a step ladder from the concierge in order to get the man down.

When, finally, he was able to prop the ladder up correctly, moving the base of it as close as possible to the mountain’s side, he saw that the gladiator was trying to stand in the crater, he was flexing his muscles and grinning, and Humboldt yelled to the man to sit down, that he could fall through if he wasn’t more careful. When it became obvious that no one was listening, Humboldt scaled the side of the ladder almost to the top and beckoned for the man to climb aboard, all the while terrified that at any moment the man might plunge through the fiberglass shell. The man gingerly mounted the ladder, squeezing himself just beneath Humboldt, who had refused to get down and instead had climbed up to the very top to let the man get on beneath him to climb down.

Atop the ladder, Professor Humboldt felt a bit giddy. He thought of himself as a child briefly, tottering around his parents’ home, three years old and fat and saying well actually over and over, and the feeling in his chest sank like it always had, and he didn’t know why. Dusk made him feel similarly, as if something had passed that he’d been ill-prepared for and had made little use of, and now, whatever it is was gone and would not return.
After the man dropped to the ground Humboldt eyed the mountain. He’d not been that close to the top of it before, and so he stepped up on to the top rung of the ladder that he’d been sitting on to see if he could get closer to the peak. On the ladder, where the peak sat just a few feet away, almost close enough for Humboldt to grab, his eyes fixed on the white glaze affixed to the fiberglass, he felt exhilarated, wild, as if he was a part of everything below him—the people, the party, everything—and his breathing grew rapid. He saw her with the rest of them, only he couldn’t tell if she was even worried or not. She had her hands up around her mouth as if trying to say something, but he couldn’t make out what it was.

His arm was outstretched and people below were telling him to grab hold, so he leaned his body out and looked down and saw that someone had grabbed hold of the ladder, and he couldn’t tell whether they were steadying it for him or trying to get him down, so he reached his hand out and felt the cold of the fiberglass and tossed himself at it, trying to grab on tight by bear-hugging the precipice, and then everyone was shouting or screaming, he couldn’t tell which, slide down, slide down, jump, maybe because he’d made it all the way up, maybe because it didn’t look that dangerous. The slope was gentle enough to not bring him harm, perhaps, he wasn’t sure.

Then he couldn’t remember why he’d gone up there at all. His face went flush, and the voices around him began to sound vaguely threatening. He wondered how long the fall would last if he let go, and thought that it wouldn’t take any time at all. He thought to himself that when it ended, maybe his sister would take pity on him and come home, if only because he was lonely. He pictured himself coming to a stop at the bottom much like a leaf drifting down from a high branch. They’d figure this out. He could
promise not to baby her anymore and then maybe she’d come back. He could pretend that he hadn’t still feel guilt about wanting her to marry better, about siding with their parents. Or the childhood guilt that lurked in his mind, that reminded him of how much he’d disliked her at times, like when she had had fits at a young age and he’d had to hold her down so that she would stop throwing handfuls of silverware at their mother, who wept. He could try to pretend that he hadn’t needed her as much as he had.

Without thinking he let go of the peak and started crashing toward the floor, not hearing anything, feeling the mountain race by beneath him, tossing him this way and that, and it seemed to him to take a very long time. Then there was only blackness, and he reminded himself that beneath him there surely lay an answer, and he was eager to learn all about it. He’d wait as long as possible, because it was somewhere, this solution, and like a brightness it was getting closer, turning the absence slowly gray, rushing at him up from the ground like electricity or fire, and far behind the light, like a tail, trailed an ending.
THE BRINK, MEASURED BY GERMAN LEVELS

In light of recent events, specifically the return of my mother from her holy resting-place after having only spent a week in the afterlife (God save her soul), certain allowances must be made. A certain leeway must be granted in the interpretation of my leaving, and though it’s true that I left rather expeditiously, it should be noted that I did so with the utmost respect for my mother and her ghostly condition. In my defense: there’s only so much guilt a man can take. And why come back from the grave just to accuse me of having murdered my father some twenty years ago? I tried to tell her—it’s been a long time gone since Dad died. It’s been two decades or more.

Listen. It was a Volvo that he was driving, the safest car imaginable. That’s all I have to say. The man was driving the safest car imaginable. I finished changing the oil in our driveway, and he hopped in the driver’s seat himself, and waved his hand out of the safest window imaginable, Swedish. It’s not something I don’t feel bad about, or guilt even, because from the even the slightest of circumstances come bad things. But I do not think I killed my father. All I know is that two hours later there’s a cop at the front door slapping his palm on the screen, his outline like a shadow.

I remember from the days after his death only vagaries, hours passing in quick bursts of light and dark, the sound of the telephone and its insistence, the papers delivered for my mother to sign. There was food enough and all that. The neighbors were kind. We had casseroles made from every possible combination of available food. That was a small thing that made me happy. And I remember how slow my mother was. How it took her
ages to cross from room to room when she decided to stir at all. I remember how finally, after a few days, her pace quickened, and how once it began to quicken it kept on going, even after she went to the mortuary by bus, grief stricken and rattled about what once seemed only barely possible, wandering around in newfound terror of widowhood, opting for public transportation over the lipstick-red MG I’d rebuilt in the garage.

So when she came back just a week after her burial, waving this incorporeal finger in my face that caught light like nothing I have seen, I had to tell her that it wasn’t her place to play the accuser. She’s god-fearing. I said that if she so strongly felt that some avenging needed to be done then why not leave it to the Lord? And also, why wait till now? We were together all the time. Why couldn’t she hash it out when she was alive? She said she only just thought of it, that it made perfect sense to her in a way that only death could crystallize.

“Who said you could come back anyway?” I told her. “You already went once. I love you and all but it must have taken some serious effort to find your way back here, and I can tell you that whatever the effort…well…it wasn’t worth it.”

She just wagged her head, and said no, it wasn’t so hard coming back.

My point is that when I left for Duquesne and fled from her ghost that she was not abandoned. If she could make it back from wherever she was then she can take care of herself is my stance. I’m not saying my fleeing was an entirely sound decision—I had before then no plans of any kind, very little money—but seeing your childhood home invaded by the spirit of your mother tends to widen what you thought possible in the world. I don’t think it can be said, I think, that I would have under normal circumstances
begun working for a tooling outfit south of Duquesne, an outfit that of all things sells six-in-one thingamajigs, because chances are, I wouldn’t have; but if your dead mother were to return from the morgue to reenact her death over and over, in yourself you’d find a newly arrived desire to make drastic change too.

The thing, which I have not yet said, is that all the while there is in the back of my mind a lingering doubt that I have not quite entirely paid for my own mother’s funeral arrangements, specifically her casket, and that somewhere someone is looking for me, and that I will eventually be found. And it’s almost as if the intensity of this thought alone will make this person materialize from thin air, demanding what is rightfully his. And then, all of a sudden, just south of Harrow, in a Coffee Harbor there that person is, saying his name is Langdon Furnon, quietly taking a seat in my booth, uninvited, and confirming my fear, saying that he represents Handheld Caskets, that he’s been looking for me for some time, how do you do? My first instinct is to run, that it is a trick, but he offers his hand to me from across the table and pumps my arm like oil will spout from my mouth, and I have to say I am grateful for the contact almost, for the company.

He says, in almost his first words, that he bears me no grudge. His enormous hands are in the air. And I envision him in all the places I’ve been, waiting, tracking me maybe, just a big blotch in someone’s peripheral. I picture him wobbling into the Coffee Harbor near Duluth, coming off the road with the salesman non-gleam, his expression dull and soft. I too have pulled into Coffee Harbor, drained, my face ashen from the perturbations of sales hell, a similar expression wiped across my mouth, and every now and then I’ve sat with others like him, salesmen on junkets, selling all the way to god
knows where, stealing away from the tribulation of some past life. So, this is familiar and all.

We sit, and for a while we sit in silence. When our conversation starts, apropos of nothing, I tell him about the slick thoroughfare of Texas, all dizzy and jumbled, where a six-in-one sells about as well as bag of hammers. Without hesitation he concurs in his own way, saying that apparently no one there dies anymore as well, cause they aren’t buying much in the way of caskets either. In the rest stop a door slams and I am momentarily convinced that I am going immediately to jail, but the sense passes, and either way, I’m near California, which is where I want to be, closer to the burly Pacific, a body of water, I have been told—by a fellow claiming to be a reader of scientific periodicals—that creates waves as large as El Dorados. Even at this distance I can feel salt spray in my coffee steam; I can smell blondes in the distance, blonde women guiltless and swaying easy on pastel merry go-rounds. I can smell them in the distance and know that I am ready to loll around, guiltless in Santa Rosa, jail or no jail.

Langdon’s paunch is flung up on the booth table, ridiculous, all jiggle and dance when he speaks, and I giggle nervously at the sight of his fat and offer to demo one of my tools.

“I can take apart this table and reassemble it in just ten minutes,” I declare.

He shakes his head, not now he says.

I let him paw a six-in-one to check it out, making sure to emphasize its exoticism. The level is German, I tell him, the screwdrivers, Korean: all four of them. I am bona fide.
He shifts his paunch slightly and takes a sip of tea, disinterested, and sets himself forward and places his arms on the Formica between us, his mouth widening slightly, as if accommodating a pair of teeth too large to hide.

“This,” he chimes, “is the best casket in the world,” and I see from the brochure he thrusts in front of me that it is identical to my mother’s casket, and that by best he means a finely rubbed box of steel with something like mink lining the inside, and when he taps the picture for emphasis, I nod appreciatively, seemingly interested. His features work and twist while he reads his brochure aloud. I begin, I must say, to get a little nervous. His brows stretch like bridges over the wet of his eyes, and I interrupt him mid-sentence, in the middle of something about pounds per square inch, to tell him from across the booth, extempore, that it’s a common fallacy to think that a casket or six-in-one tool will not bring truth, some simple comprehension of the world and its basic workings. His head rocks slowly, eyes dart across the brim of an almost empty cup. There is something like a significant pause between us, a lull of muddled comprehension.

Langdon Furnon, as far as I can see, is a casket salesman that cannot sell.

After a long silence, Langdon says, “Amen,” carefully.

“You know I can’t pay you what I owe,” I say, and he nods slowly, his eyes set firmly on the table.

When Mom’s ghost wandered back from the morgue, wailing and cussing, bringing familiar pangs of guilt with her, I got headaches watching her body, the way it wavered like water, and I broke out in hives as she kept telling me she’d never love again. As if that has something to do with anything.
Every couple of hours she reenacted her death, falling down the stairs of our home till she lay in a spectral heap, accusing me ad nauseam of causing my father’s car crash two decades ago while she slumped on the tile, and I carelessly accused her of over-dramatizing her own death.

For a moment, Langdon and I sit at ease. He motions to the waitress and orders another cup of Earl Grey.

Langdon says, “Have you ever been to Albuquerque?”

I tell him that I’ve not had the pleasure, and he shakes his head, heavy, and it moves like a revolving door on a hinge, like the force of its inertia could keep it moving for days. “It’s a terrible place, I know, and I know it’s terrible because Walt Harrison has been there.” Something appears in Langdon’s eyes that makes me nervous. I’ve had experiences, past encounters with salesmen gone beyond boundaries. “He beats me everywhere,” mutters Langdon.

I claim to have no knowledge of any Harrison.

“No?” he says, “Well, Harrison is everywhere.”

The way Langdon tells it, by the time he arrived, brochures in hand, Albuquerque had already put their dead snugly away, rested their cold backs on the lining of what, to me, looked like mink, and had that been the first time, Langdon said, perhaps he would have gone on without worry, on to the next town, ready to dig in for a tough leg of territory. But it was not the first time, and he’d made promises to himself, promises that he would find this fellow and show him what was what, though what he’d really do was beyond him, he said. All he knew is that some pencil-necked geek somewhere had seriously erred.
“They’ve crossed our routes somehow, but I don’t know how. I’ve even tried deviating from my own route, but it’s done no good. Harrison,” he says, shaking his head, pointing his nose toward the empty cups to his left. “He’s sold every model casket we have. I went door to door in Albuquerque, and nothing. It’s not right,” he says, “You just can’t be the second casket salesman.”

Out of sheer deference, I concur.

“Here, here. Listen to me,” I say. “I was almost killed once.”

Langdon breathes deep. His stomach whines. “At least I was almost potentially killed.”

And I think I was in Oxford, Mississippi. The heat there makes people dangerous, of this I am sure. I offered to demo my tools for a neighborhood block, a neighborhood where the houses gleamed, white, big colonial Georgians with colonnades and every one of them declined. No solicitors, they said. They even had a sign out at the edge of the neighborhood. So after a quiet afternoon in the college bar, I went back to every house with a colonnade that I could find, dismantling their front doors with only four screwdrivers, a hammer, and a level. And so polite were the wives, viz. their southern gentility, that some, while I dismantled even their own front doors, offered me lemonade and all but kissed me on the lips before I moved on down the block. After a while their husbands returned from work and threw me into the street, and finally, after many a defensive technique had proved unsuccessful, the cops came and locked me up. The sheriff saved my life, I believed, so as soon as I made bail I gave him a six-in-one free of charge and drove across the county line for Memphis.
Langdon and I take a small break from conversation and sip our drinks delicately, continually eyeing one another across the rims of our cups. I try to make myself look a bit more serious; I wonder if he thinks I might run. I put on my Sell face—the face of a salesman during a significant pause. I look Langdon Furnon in the eye, the man who told me he’s hunting for a Harrison.

“It was her neck,” I say.

“I’m sorry?”

“My mother died recently. Fell down a staircase. Broke her neck,” I say. “A neck can’t take that kind of abuse.”

“You’re right. You’re right about that,” he spits, shooting tiny marbles of tea out of the corners of his lips.

I give him the odd detail or two. How she fell. Tumbling hand over foot until her neck thumped straight into the fourth stair from the bottom. I tell him that the doctor gave me the scientific skinny and informed me on the nature of ‘rotating bodies that fall onto their necks’. How the doctor told me her spine was brittle and broke.

Langdon does a nervous shuffle, and I watch as a vague image of Martha Tim, flashes across the gray of his eyes, his expression fixed. “Listen,” he says, holding up his right hand. “May I ask, at least, where it is you’re going?”

“To Santa Rosa.”

“Why?”

“Okay. Here it is: I was drinking heavily,” I tell him, “playing golf one day. I lost the ball and was on my hands and knees trying to find it near this large picture window in the den.” Langdon sips from his cup, eyeing me carefully from across the booth. “I
placed the ball on the bottom end of an overturned wine glass, the curvy kind you want a woman’s figure to resemble, and stood up slow, dizzy as hell, and I got myself in the stance with my feet apart, knees slightly bent and all that. Eyes on the ball. Wrists straight.” I get my hands into the correct golfing grip and show him from across the booth how straight the wrists are supposed to be. “Anyway, I brought the club back as hard as I could, imagined the ball as the bun on top of my mother’s head, and swung until I fell onto the hearth practically headfirst and lost consciousness.”

“I’ve never set foot on a golf course in my life,” says Langdon.

“It’s not important either way. When I woke up, I had my head inside the open cover of a Southern Living, and I saw merry go rounds. They have a park full of them near Santa Rosa.”

“Merry go rounds?” says Langdon.

At this, I get up from the booth and begin to tell Mr. Furnon about merry go-rounds. I move slowly in circles while I explain the soft pull of centrifugal force, inertia and the feel of slight breezes. How it might feel to hold on for dear life while your suit flaps bravely in the sun. As best I can I recreate the sound, the whirring of gears and the mechanical nursery songs. I grab onto the stool and spin around, my hands formed around an imaginary pole. Langdon watches, taking sips while I slide and shimmy, and then sit back down, barely able to breathe.

“So, Santa Rosa?” he says.

“California,” I tell him.

“I know that,” he says.
“You know, for a collection agent you’re not very good. Aren’t you supposed to get the money from me no matter?”

“But I’m no collection agent.” He puts down his cup quickly, unabashed. “I volunteered. Hell, I don’t even work for them anymore. I was fired two days ago. I just said that stuff so you’d talk to me. Mainly I’m looking for Harrison, but I figured I could find you as well, that maybe it’d make a decent story. There was no one else to go really. I’d already gone and left and I just got notice so I figured why cut the trip short? I’ve been tailing you for days. I don’t have anywhere to go.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Tell me, have you ever ridden on a merry go-round Mr. Furnon?”

“No.” He puts down his cup.

“You should. You really should,” I say. “You sit on these horses that are mounted on poles, they’re all different colors, like pinks and blues and yellows. You just sit on the horse and go around and around.”

“Around and around, on real horses?”

“No they’re plastic. It’s a real peaceful thing. You just grab on tight.”

“You get dizzy?” he says.

“Nope. Not at all. You might get sleepy.”

“Santa Rosa then?”

“Yeah. I’m almost there,” I say. “You can come if you want. Don’t have much else to do by the sound of it.”
“I have enough to do,” he says, and I see the gray in his eyes turn to a kind of silvery stuff as he grabs the table, his knuckles white and secure. His voice rises and drops, body quivers, the small rolls of fat beneath his chin set themselves in syncopation.

“For the past two years,” says Langdon, “every route I’m sent on is gone, already sold and needing nothing but things that don’t have much to do with me. Do you know what that feels like?” Langdon doesn’t wait for a response. He keeps on about Harrison and his office, how they had no right to let him go, the pencil necked geeks, the effing bastards and the main office. Langdon says he wants credit where credit is due then spills his tea across the table.

I just sit and stare. At length I begin to remember the juicers and multi-use tools that litter the trunk and backseat of my Fairlane. I think I remember selling two or three somewhere back in South Dakota, but then that is neither here nor there. I watch Langdon and find myself encumbered by sadness, so that I stand forcefully, unable to bare the pressure, and tell him we both need a goddamn walk.

In more serene moments, Mom talked quietly about the ails of incorporeal widowhood, which were foreign and heartbreaking, and made inquiries about my eating habits in hopes that I was taking good care of myself. I am a sensitive person. I am a grown man for Christ’s sake.

One day I found her mounted on the steps, her arm resting on the wrought-iron rail. She was poised for tumult; angrily, she told me she loved me and that I was to blame for everything. And for the rest of the night, she kept crying see-through tears, kept falling down the stairs and sobbing for help. Kept me half-awake and full of dread.
Once outside Langdon begins to calm down, and I offer to take him for a drive. I get in the driver’s seat of my mother’s old Fairlane, and Langdon slams the heavy passenger door. I pull out of the parking lot in silence and drive through the small town, a place named San Carlotta out in the deserts of western New Mexico, on down a narrow treeless boulevard off the highway till we come to a stop sign. I pull to a complete stop and let the engine idle. I need to talk. But before I get it out, Langdon opens his door and walks toward the red sign, both he and it glowing in the headlights. I give a start as the solid thwack of his fist hitting the sign comes jumping back at me. The sign only vibrates stubbornly, lets out a metallic warble and Langdon hits it again. I sit in the car, listening to the faint hum of the air conditioner and wishing I were somewhere else. I wish I were in Santa Rosa, resting comfortably on a blue horse. There are no concerns, no customers, no stop signs on merry-go-rounds. Outside, the sound of Langdon beating the stop sign with his fists comes back at me over and over. I get out of the car real slow.

I watch quietly while he tries to wring the sign down with his bare hands.

“This is only making my hands callous and sore,” he shouts.

We are both on the brink, Langdon and I, and my hands shake wildly on the steering wheel. The night before I left, Mom’s voice came up into my room through the floorboards, booming. Unnatural. Somehow, unbeknownst to me, she’d learned to wield inanimate objects as weapons while I was out at the bar for the day, and when I got home that evening, I found her throwing things around the house. I’d just come home through the front door and a toaster came careening by my head, slamming against the front door. Later, I found her on the kitchen floor, exhausted and apologetic, explaining she wouldn’t be able to move anything else for a few hours. It took too much energy, she claimed.
“How could you have killed your father?” she asks.

In a small moment of forced concentration, I see myself in Santa Rosa. I imagine the air streaming out to the ocean. I imagine the tight circle of motion, a horse I name myself, and the balmy sun on my body, newly washed in innocence. A place where I’m able to imagine I’ve never hurt anyone.

To Langdon Furnon I say: “I’m not above the common man. I have a purpose, a future. I work during the day. I watch television at night. I am a salesman goddammit.”

“To the common man,” says Langdon Furnon. I look over and see that he’s somehow bent the signpost to the ground. He’s hunched over, his chest heaving. “The common man is our best customer,” he says, and I agree wholeheartedly. “And every man is our customer, much like death is everyone’s consumer.” He groans, leans over the black concrete.

“You should put that in your brochure,” I add, then sit quietly on the black top. I faintly remember I almost sold a six-in-one today.

“Four screwdrivers,” I told the woman behind the screen door. “A hammer,” I said, “and a level designed by Germans.” She peeked around the door as it squeaked open.

“How much?” she asked. I said something like nineteen bucks, and she asked me what types of payment I accepted and then said, “will you take credit?”

“No, I’m sorry, ma’am. I can’t,” I said. She moved back behind the quickly closing screen door. “I’m sorry,” I said.

And I was.
Langdon looks up at me, his belly squashed between his round legs and head as he continues to gasp for air. I can tell that we are after the things that spurned us. We’re men on missions (fallen to earth), like so many defective missiles.

I think about the awaiting drive out on through the desert, alone, penned in, surrounded by juicers and roughly eight boxes of six-tools-in-one thingamajiggies.

Twenty-four to a box. You do the math.

It’ll be about two more days till I reach Santa Rosa. As we both sit on the concrete, Langdon still lurching for breath, tending to his wounded hands, I imagine myself holed up in some motor inn, scared to death of what I may not find in California. I can imagine the blue light of the television flashing on thin walls and already cannot help but think of Mr. Langdon Furnon in a fashion that waxes sentimental. Maybe, we could be great partners. We could comfort each other, perhaps. We could even incorporate, stretch out on our own and stop worrying. We could long discuss the nature of our problems, our tangled histories. He and I are on the run.

Then I think of the dreams I might have later, once we’ve departed, leaving one another to our tasks. I’ll be in Pittsburgh, perhaps, next to my mother in this dream, in our old house. And maybe she’ll be laid out on the floor, surrounded by bent posts and empty bottles of cola, one of each in her wiry fists. There might be black and white photos of me pouring water over the asphalt of some intersection, a black and white picture of me under the hood of the family car while my father smiles wide in the driver’s seat.

“I’m afraid she’s dead,” Langdon will say, and I’ll agree by looking him in the face and saying yes.

“She is definitely dead,” I add.
“You’ll need a casket,” Langdon mentions, “the best.” I will have to apologize, I suppose, and explain that we’ve already purchased one from a Mr. Harrison.

And then, in this dream, the sea will come, wiping away all malefaction, sweeping away my mother and her ghostly form, and I’ll wake and wait for morning, for the pound of the sea in my ears, for the gentle tilt of a carousel going round and round and so on.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Bryan Robert Smith was born in Nashville, TN. He attended Clemson University, where he received a BA in English.